

THE INITIATION CEREMONIES OF THE ABORIGINES OF  
PORT STEPHENS, N. S. WALES.

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(Communicated by R. H. MATHEWS, L.S.)

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THE male aboriginal, on attaining the age of puberty, reaches the most eventful period of his life. Hitherto his place has been amongst the women and children, but he now passes through a ceremony admitting him to a brotherhood whose secrets are inviolable and whose power is more dreaded than any Vehmgericht. Now filled with a sense of the dignity of manhood, he becomes entitled to greater privileges than previously enjoyed.

This ceremony of admission is known by various names in different parts of the colony, but amongst the Kutthung<sup>1</sup> and other tribes of the north-east coast it is called the Keeparra: I believe that the first detailed account<sup>2</sup> of it, and its sister ceremony "the Dalgai," was one written by Mr. R. H. Mathews.

In December 1896 and again in December 1897, I sojourned among the remnant of the Kutthung tribe at Port Stephens without being able to elicit from them anything more valuable than the reluctant admission that at the present time the youths are initiated at Forster.

I mentioned the difficulties I encountered in obtaining particulars of their secret ceremonies to my friend Mr. R. H. Mathews, from whom I have always received encouragement and assistance in all ethnological work, and on his next visit to Maitland he drove out with me to the native camp at Sawyer's Point on the Karuah River. He was personally known to some of the men present

<sup>1</sup> Pronounced Kut-thung.

<sup>2</sup> Journ. Anthrop. Inst., xxvi., 320-340. Proc. Roy. Soc. Vic., ix., N.S. 120-136.

there, and was at once received by them as one of the initiated. I remained in the camp "with the women and children," as they jocularly expressed it, while Mr. Mathews took all the initiated men into a secluded place in the bush near by, where a Winggerah<sup>1</sup> was held, at which he explained that he had told me all the secrets of the keeparra and had imposed upon me the usual obligations of secrecy. As soon as they were satisfied, I was summoned and shown the sacred goonanduckyer<sup>2</sup> and was formally admitted as a member of the tribe entitled to all the privileges of an initiate.

With the help of Mr. R. H. Mathews, I have been able to obtain the following information, though not without considerable difficulty:—The place of initiation at Forster, New South Wales, consisted of a large circular space called "boolbung," about thirty feet in diameter, resembling a circus ring. This is connected with another smaller circle called "goonambung" situated in a very secluded part of the bush, by a pathway (goolga) about a quarter of a mile in length; the trees along which for some distance from the goonambung have geometrical figures and representations of various animals carved on their trunks. In the centre of the goonambung a fire was lighted, and was kept burning. My enquiries proved that the ground at Forster differs but little from that described by Mr. Mathews in "The Keeparra Ceremony of Initiation,"<sup>3</sup> to which I would refer my readers for more minute details.

When a tribe has a number of youths who have attained the proper age for initiation, a messenger<sup>4</sup> is sent out to summon the neighbouring tribes to assist in the ceremony. The messenger

<sup>1</sup> A secret council of initiates.

<sup>2</sup> Bullroarer used in the keeparra.

<sup>3</sup> Journ. Anthrop. Inst., xxvi., 321–323.

<sup>4</sup> The person of this messenger is quite sacred, and whatever differences there may be between the tribe summoning and the tribe summoned, the utmost amity must outwardly prevail at this time, and any interference with the person of the messenger would be promptly resented and avenged, not only by the tribe to which he belonged, but also by the neighbouring tribes.

who is an initiate, carries with him as symbols of authority the bullroarer (goonanduckyer), the message-stick, some tails and pieces of colourless stone.<sup>1</sup> The goondukyer and message-stick must never be seen by a woman or an uninitiated person, and I have been assured that instant death would overtake a female or boy unfortunate enough to see one of these implements.<sup>2</sup>

When a messenger approaches a camp, he swings the goonanduckyer so that it may be heard by some of the older men, who immediately recognise the significance of the sound as soon as they hear it, and coming out of their camp they meet the messenger and conduct him into the camp, where he is entertained until the following day, when a winggerah is held to which his invitation is delivered.

If the invitation is, as usual, accepted, the whole tribe gets ready for the march, the women and boys however, being kept in ignorance of the object of the journey. When the tribe arrives near the ground they halt, and the initiates proceed to paint their bodies in squares and circles with white and red colours, and go to the goonambung ring, which they enter in Indian file, and marching round take their seats on the wall, in such a position that they look towards the burri or country whence they have come.

Each man, who has a son to be initiated, bears a blotch of red ochre on his forehead, and by this means they indicate the number of youths they have brought to be initiated.<sup>3</sup>

The tribe which has issued the invitation are then summoned by the swinging of the goonanduckyer, at the sound of which they form in single file and march into the goonambung, thus making themselves known to the new arrivals, who arise and march to the boolbung circle, each carrying a small branch or bough of a tree in each hand. Here they dance with the women of the tribe to whom the ground belongs, and at the conclusion of it the men belonging to that tribe go into the ring and salute the newly

<sup>1</sup> Usually crystalline quartz.

<sup>2</sup> This appears to apply only to a message-stick relating to the Keeparra.

<sup>3</sup> Proc. Roy. Soc. Vic., ix., N.S., 124.

arrived women by dancing around them. All the men then strip the leaves off the branches they carry and scatter them over the ground. This portion of the ritual appears to be meaningless now, but it may perhaps have formerly symbolised the stripping of the youth of his old character preparatory to conferring on him the *toga virilis*.

The day for commencing the initiation having arrived, the men who are to act as the stewards go to the goonabung and assume the symbols of office in the shape of a smearing of grease and charred bark of the apple-tree (goondary).<sup>1</sup> The boys are prepared by their female relations, who cover them all over with a mixture of red ochre and grease, and they are also adorned with a belt from which is suspended two tails.

The youths when their preparations have been completed proceed to the boobung in company with the women and children. The latter, however, do not enter the ring but take their places outside, close to the youths belonging to their respective tribes; the youths standing inside the ring at the points nearest their respective burris.

The women and children who have been previously made to lie down with their faces to the ground are then covered with rugs and bushes, and the proponents for initiation with their heads enveloped in rugs are taken some distance along the goolga out of sight of the women, and then made to lie down with the rugs still covering them. Whilst in this position, the awful sound of the goonanduckyer, the voice of Goolumbra further impresses them with the solemnity of the occasion and serious nature of the step they are taking, and renders their minds better fitted to receive the lessons of the keepara.

The youths having been taken out of sight as just stated, the women and children are permitted to rise, and are conducted to another camp, the site of which has previously been selected at a wingerah held prior to the commencement of the proceedings.

<sup>1</sup> Not the fruit tree, but the so-called apple-tree of Australia (*Angophora*) Eds.

Before leaving for the new camp a doolbhi<sup>1</sup> is erected outside the ring to indicate to any other tribes who arrive later on, the direction in which it is situated. Near this new camp, which is called Ula<sup>2</sup>, a piece of ground is neatly swept and two fires are lighted thereon some distance apart. On this playground which has been thus prepared, the women and girls dance every evening during the absence of the boys.

The women having been taken away as just described, the novices whom we have left lying down at the goolga are ordered to stand up and the rugs are then placed over their heads in the form of cowls. They are then taken along the goolga towards the goonabung, and on the way they are shown by the elders the teeroong or various geometrical and other figures carved on the trees. As far as I can learn, there are no figures carved on the earth at the keeparra ground used by the Kutthung. None of the aborigines from whom I drew my information knew the meaning of the teeroong.

When the youths arrive at the goonabung they are taken around it, and then marched towards the bush, the boys alongside of their guardians, with their eyes intently fixed upon the ground until they reach a suitable place, where a camp is formed in the shape of a crescent or semicircle with two fires in front of it, and also a level space carefully cleared and swept. On this place every night the men mimic the actions of various native animals, and the goonanduckyer is sounded occasionally to impress the novices who are informed, that it is the voice of Goolumbra, of whose terrible powers they are warned. During their stay at this camp which is called the keelaybang, the novice who is kept either in a lying or sitting position, must not communicate by word with his guardians, and is threatened with severe penalties if he does so.

<sup>1</sup> "Doolbhi" consists of a forked piece of timber inserted in the ground with another piece tied at right angles to it a little distance from the ground pointing in the direction of the new camp. If there are any streams between the boobung and the new camp, they are represented by twigs fastened across the pointer equal in number to the streams.

<sup>2</sup> Ula appears to be a name given to any kind of camp.

Should he desire anything he must touch one of the men who continues to question until he gets an affirmative nod from the boy. Often the man who has charge of the boy will at once know what is the novice's desire, but in order to test him will refrain from putting the proper question. During their stay in the keelaybang no meat is given to the boys until it has been cut into small pieces and the bone and sinew carefully removed. In some tribes the boys are given human urine to drink and excrement to eat, but at the present time this is not practised amongst the Kutthung, nor have I been able to discover whether it was ever in vogue, but the name goonanduckyer<sup>1</sup> hints at its existence.

Should a boy desire to micturate he is allowed to do so at one of the fires, alternating the operation at each fire. Any other call of nature is obeyed outside the camp, one of the initiates all the time keeping guard over him. After some days spent in this camp, the cry of a dingo (mirree), will be heard near it. This noise or howl is uttered by men who have come from the women's camp, and is answered by a shout from the keelaybang. When the new arrivals get in sight they march in single file towards the camp, with bushes in front of them which they throw down on their arrival and execute a dance. The men who have charge of the boys pick up these bushes and commence dancing with them in their hands, all the while stripping off the leaves. The object of this visit appears to be to ascertain when the novitiate will be completed and a return made to the camp. Several of such visits may possibly have to be made before the initiation is accomplished. During their stay the boys are taught the sacred songs of the tribes and the laws relating to the class system; they also commence to learn an entirely new language. In this new language the returning boomerang (barrakun) is known as dulla, and the woomera (yukri) is called burumba. The learning of this language is a matter of time, and the knowledge acquired of it is useful in ascertaining whether a man is an initiate.

<sup>1</sup> *Stercus humanum edens.*

On the morning before they depart to the women's camp the boys are made to stand in a row, their heads remaining covered, and then the men form in line in front of them, and two of them swing the goonanduckyer. After it has been sounded sufficiently the coverings are removed from the boys heads, and they are permitted to see for the first time the instrument whose sound has so impressed them. Some old men who are strangers to the boys then step forward and threaten them, that, if ever they reveal anything that has been shown them or taught them, they will be killed, and this is quite sufficient to deter them from revealing the secrets of the keeparra. This concludes the ceremony in the bush, and a start is made for the camp where the women have been left, but on the way the whole party go into a waterhole or at some point along a stream of water previously agreed upon and wash themselves. At the conclusion of their ablutions they singe the hair off the bodies of the novices, and then cover the whole of the party from head to foot with pipeclay before resuming their journey to the women's camp. On their way they are met by a number of men from the women's camp, who announce their arrival by howling like dingos, and this howling is answered by one of the men with the guardians swinging a goonanduckyer. Each member of the party from the women's camp carries a green bough in his hand which is thrown down, when they form into line in front of the novices and a short dance is gone through. The men with the novices then pick up the bushes and strip them of their leaves which are scattered about on the ground. The new arrivals then return to the women's camp and prepare for the return of the novices by making all the women lie down and covering them with bushes. After sufficient time has elapsed for these preparations to be completed, the novices and men, divested of all incumbrances, make a start for the camp, their approach to which is heralded by the sound of the barroway<sup>1</sup> by a man who has previously gone out of the camp. On the arrival of the novices with their guardians at the camp they form a complete circle around it, and then the

<sup>1</sup> A large bullroarer.

women are permitted to rise and greet their sons whom in their disguise they have considerable difficulty in recognising. On discovering their sons the mothers go forward to them and raise their breasts which the sons take hold of and pretend to suck. Amongst other tribes the sisters of the novices greet them by rubbing their feet on the feet and ankles of the novices, but this custom did not appear to prevail amongst the Kutthung. After each mother has greeted her son in this fashion, the women pass out of the ring under the arms of the men who then throw bushes on the fires causing them to smoke. Each guardian then takes hold of the novice under his care and holds him for a time in the smoke, after which all the novices take their departure together with their hands linked, to the place where they have left their belongings, and they are soon followed thither by their guardians who remain with them for the night.

The next day the visiting tribes make preparations for departure, and on their journey the novices must not camp with the elders, but like those whom they have left behind they are kept in a "bachelor's camp" until their initiation is completed. Each night however, they are allowed to approach a little nearer to the general camp, and at last are finally admitted into it. Before being allowed the privilege of marriage, they must attend more keeparras, the number of which, as far as I can ascertain is five, but it is possible that more regard is paid to the age of the youth than to the number of keeparras he has attended. A new name is also given to him now which must never be used within the hearing of women; the raised scars (bheerammer), are made on his body.

Prior to being initiated he was permitted to use as food all kinds of fish, honey, and the female of all land animals, but certain birds and the male of all land animals were forbidden him. After his first keeparra he is entitled to partake of the flesh of the male kangaroo-rat, and after the second he is permitted to eat the male opossum, and each succeeding keeparra increases his privileges in this respect.

The custom of knocking out one of the front teeth during the ceremony is not now in vogue amongst the Kutthung, nor is it certain that it ever existed amongst them, and of late years the practice of ornamenting the bodies with scars has fallen into disuse. It is more than probable that the last keeparra has been held by them; for as each year goes by their numbers dwindle, and in January 1899, they were not able to get a sufficient number of aborigines together to enable them to celebrate the ceremony. Many of those I have met along the coast had never gone through the keepaara, but had been merely initiated into the dhalgai, a sister ceremony, much shorter however than the keeparra, and needing for its practice no assemblage of adjoining tribes nor any prepared ground; in fact it requires but a half dozen men who have passed through the keeparra, and the use of a goonanduckyer, to enable the youth to be initiated. As the dhalgai ceremony amongst the Kutthung does not differ from that already described by Mr. R. H. Mathews, I will refer my readers to his work<sup>1</sup> for an account of it.

The burri<sup>2</sup> of the tribe whose initiation ceremony I have here described, extended along the Karuah River's southern bank and the southern shore of Port Stephens to Pipeclay Creek, whose western bank formed the eastern boundary of their territory; but the southern and western boundaries were uncertain or rather I received varying accounts from different individuals. These boundaries were no doubt strictly adhered to before the advent of Europeans, but afterwards when tribes were killed off or driven from their territories the boundaries of adjoining burris would be changed, and this would account for the discrepancies in the statements I have received. The country on the north side of Port Stephens and the Karuah extending down to the right bank of the Myall River belonged to the Gummipingal;<sup>3</sup> the land lying

<sup>1</sup> Journ. Anthropol. Inst., xxvi., 338 - 340.

<sup>2</sup> District belonging to a tribe.

<sup>3</sup> "People of the Spear." Gummi a spear, and gal people. The grass trees from which the material for spear handles was obtained grew abundantly in this district.

between the Myall River, the Myall Lakes and the sea, was occupied by the Grewigerigal,<sup>1</sup> and the district lying between Pipeclay and Tellegherry Creeks was occupied by the Doowalligal.<sup>2</sup>

Amongst the Kutthung and neighbouring tribes there was no code of signs in use, as some believe amongst the initiates, and in a community such as that in which the aboriginals lived, where every male on attaining the proper age would be initiated, and in which all initiates would be known to the older men who played a leading part in the keeparra, the use of such signs for the purpose of distinguishing initiates except from adjoining tribes would be utterly unnecessary, and in the latter case the language previously referred to would furnish an infallible test.

In conclusion, I wish to refer to a description of the "Gaboora" ceremony<sup>3</sup> published in the Australian Anthropological Journal a year or two ago. Mr. Cohen, the writer of the article says that "the youths to be initiated were kept apart from the other members of the tribe for a month previous to the inauguration ceremonies, and that if any female was detected holding conversation with them or touching them she would be put to death." According to my investigations the novices remain in the general camp with their female friends until the final morning on which they are taken away by the old men. It is also stated that the "gaboora ceremonies invariably occupied two days." From ten days to a fortnight is the shortest time employed for this purpose among all the tribes of the north east coast. Mr. Cohen's description of the scenes in the bush, while the novices are away with the chief men undergoing the ordeal of initiation, are to say the least disjointed and fragmentary. Moreover some of the scenes which he narrates were never heard of by my native informants; whilst others were stated to be merely portions of ordinary corroborees, and in no way connected with the rites of the keeparra or "gaboora," as it is called by the writer of the article in question.

<sup>1</sup> "People of the Sea." Grewi the sea, and gal people.

<sup>2</sup> "People living between the two"; but whether the name is given them from the fact that they lived between two streams or between two tribes I could not ascertain.

<sup>3</sup> "Description of the Gaboora Ceremony."—Aust. Anthropol. Journ., Vol. I., pp. 83 - 84, 97, 98, 115 - 117; Vol. I., N.S. pp. 7 - 10.