

PART IV.

MELVILLE AND BATHURST ISLANDS.

BURIAL POSTS.

The natives of these islands in the far north-west practise inhumation, the graves on Melville Island being known as *mundi*. Around the graves, both of men and women, are placed posts termed *duduni*. These are often elaborately decorated with variously arranged lines and bands, peculiar to them—yellow, red, white, and black—longitudinal, spiral, and alternating. It is customary to add one post to a grave each year, for perhaps ten or twelve years. Spears are thrown at a grave to drive down the spirit of the deceased. Professor Baldwin Spencer says the mainland natives, so far as he is aware, "have no similar custom." These posts are erected at the lapse of some months after a burial, from three or four at first to ultimately as many as thirteen.²⁵⁷ Some are mere posts, but others are rudely shaped, and one or more notably taller than the others; the designs on them are said to have no significance whatever. On the taller posts bark baskets are placed.

The most elaborate account of these island burials and accompanying paraphernalia, accompanied by a bibliography, is that of Dr. H. Basedow,²⁵⁸ from the first notice by Sir Gordon Bremer onwards. He also calls attention to the use of similar posts at Port Lihou, in Endeavour Strait, Cape York, by Professor J. Bete Jukes, on Coburg Peninsula, North Australia, by J. Mac Gillivray, during the voyages of H.M.S. "Rattlesnake," and on Prince of Wales Island, Torres Straits, by the same author; by Inspector P. Foelsche and himself amongst the Larrakia in the Port Darwin District. The next point of importance is supplementary to Sir Baldwin Spencer's description of the baskets and dilly-bags placed on the taller posts. He says that Sir G. Bremer, Major — Campbell, and Dr. Klaatsch "found implements and weapons, presumably belongings of the deceased, lying upon the grave or the grave posts, or stuck upright in the ground. They mention spears, waddies, bark water-vessels, and baskets of fan-palm leaves."

Dr. Basedow concludes this portion of his interesting paper in these words:—"The Continental Australian certainly, also, has methods of his own to mark a place of burial, but in a decidedly more transitory and less

laborious way. The latter leaves already existing belongings of the deceased upon the grave; the islander, in addition, surrounds the spot with specially prepared posts such as have been described herein. Apart from the carvings, the painted designs alone are quite superior to anything existing on the mainland. The marked symmetry of the individual patterns and their diversity, when compared with one another, can hardly find a parallel on the mainland. We might look upon these island productions as representing interesting and independent transition stages between the primitive art of the continental Australian, on the one hand, and the more perfect types of Equatorial island tribes to the north of Australia on the other."

Indeed, we may regard this system of sepulchral mementism, as of even greater importance than attached to it by Dr. Basedow. "Stakes and posts are often used all the world over as marks of an interment. Like other grave-marks, they also share naturally in the honours paid to the ghost or nascent god. . . . At a very early date, however, the stake, I fancy, became a mere grave-mark, and though, owing to its comparative inconspicuousness, it obtains relatively little notice, it is now and always has been by far the most common mode of preserving the memory of the spot where a person lies buried."²⁵⁹

Whether these Melville and Bathurst Island posts share "in the honours paid to the ghost" is an open question. When first erected one would imagine they did, being extended and added to from time to time, but both Professor Spencer and Dr. Basedow agree that, as years rolled on, the interments became neglected, and the blacks display no objection to removal of the posts. This is paralleled by the falling into disrepair of hut burials along the Lower Murray, Lower Lachlan, and Lower Darling Rivers.²⁶⁰

An exceedingly interesting case that may possibly be a variant of the northern custom is mentioned by Dr. Basedow.²⁶¹ At Glen Ferdinand, Musgrave Ranges, North-west South Australia, a woman's grave was surrounded by a mound, and on the summit of this her implements, a yam-stick and a coolamon had been stuck in the sand in an upright position, "almost as a tombstone might be erected."

²⁵⁷ Spencer—*Bull. N. Territory*, No. 2, 1912, pp. 47-48; "Native Tribes of the N. Territory Austr.," 1914, p. 229, pl. opp., p. 232; "Guide Echnol. Colln. Nat. Mus. Vict.," 2nd ed., 1913, p. 112.

²⁵⁸ Basedow—"Notes on the Natives of Bathurst Island, North Australia"—*Journ. Anthropol. Inst.*, xliii, 1913, pp. 311 and 320.

²⁵⁹ Allen, Grant—"Evolution of the Idea of God," 2nd ed. (n.d.), p. 51.

²⁶⁰ Beveridge—*Journ. R. Soc. N.S. Wales*, xvii, 1883, p. 30.

²⁶¹ Basedow—*Trans. R. Soc. S. Austr.*, xxviii, 1894, p. 35, pl. vi, fig. 1.

Dr. A. W. Howitt, quoting from Richard Howitt, says that amongst the Mount Macedon, King, Ovens, and Murray River tribes in Victoria, stakes five feet high and twenty in number were placed at short intervals between them about a grave.²⁶²

"In one part of Queensland," says Dr. J. Fraser, "two sticks are set up in the ground near a grave. These are about two feet long, shaped like a *nullah*, painted red, and with the tops covered with fine white cockatoo down." Even in New South Wales, on the Narran River, where there are no taphoglyphs, "a few painted upright posts" marked a grave.²⁶³

Again, the Rev. L. E. Threlkeld,²⁶⁴ in giving an account of the interment of a woman's remains, said, after the woman's corpse had been carefully laid on green boughs in the grave, "a stick with which she used to walk [evidently the woman's yam-stick] was stuck upright on the grave, just over her head."

I now suggest the following question for consideration by those interested in the burial customs of the Australians. Are the taphoglyphs of the Macquarie-Bogan-Barwon area, and elsewhere throughout this central portion of New South Wales, a local survival of the Bathurst and Melville Islands burial-post cult, or an extension of the same in a different dress? It appears to me, viewing the sporadic occurrence of not very dissimilar customs elsewhere related by Fraser, Howitt, Parker, and Basedow, that such may be the case—at any rate, it is a branch of the subject worthy of consideration and discussion. The practice of erecting carved and decorated posts in the two northern islands is probably one of a higher order than the mere carving of the southern taphoglyphs, when we remember the almost universal employment of stakes and posts as marks of interment.

Do these Melville and Bathurst Islands' posts bear any relation to the stone pillars surrounding the dagobas of Ceylon, as at Anuradhapura for instance? These upright stone posts in theory, says Fergusson,²⁶⁵ "look much more like the rows of detached stone pillars of northern climes. In practice, however, they too look as if they have just passed through the wooden stage.

Their forms so slender, and their ornaments so essentially modern, that they can hardly have assumed their present shape directly from a rude stone obelisk."

One can only conclude that this dendroglyph culture is of immense antiquity. We have before us a people devoid of any knowledge of agriculture (see Appendix ii), of the search for and use of metals—practically a Neolithic people—amongst whom megalithic architecture was unknown (see Appendix iii), with an entire absence of pottery, but who at the same time prepared monuments to the memory of their dead, of which many "may be described as elegant, and all represent strenuous mental and physical efforts." Whence came this culture?

²⁶² Howitt—"Native Tribes S. E. Austr.," 1904, p. 458.

²⁶³ Parker—"The Euahlayi Tribe," 1905, p. 94.

²⁶⁴ Threlkeld—*Sydney Gazette*, xxiv, No. 1245 (27th Sept.).

²⁶⁵ Fergusson—"Tree and Serpent Worship," 2nd ed., 1873, p. 95, text fig.