

## THE WORIMI: HUNTER-GATHERERS AT PORT STEPHENS

BY

BORIS SOKOLOFF

## PART VIII

## SOCIAL AND CEREMONIAL ASPECTS: SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

The broad category of social organization includes the following aspects: leadership, and government; punishments; duels and fights; family structure; marriage and totemism.

In common with other tribal groups of Australian Aborigines, the Worimi lived within a social system which had social as well as spiritual significance that enabled them to live successfully in balance within their environment.

Leadership devolved on certain leading men who had more influence than others. These were older men, who were fully initiated, acted as general advisers.

The members of each group were under the control of a kind of head-man ... but except in the matter of disposal of widows, which were merely the enforcement of customary law of the tribe, and the leading of various expeditions...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.... The governing authority was vested in the assembly of old men of the local groups who met periodically and discussed matters both national and internationally. (McKiernan, p.886)

There were two such head men, one for the coastal groups and another for the inland groups: that is, one for the *Maiangal*, the *Garawerrigal* and the other for the *Garuagal*, the *Buraigal* and the *Gamipingal*. (See Part I, H.N.H., Vol.6, pp.166-9.) Such a duality is probably a reflection of environmental differences and the close relationship of the groups to the wildlife or natural features in their territory.

One of the functions of the assembly of elders was to dispense punishment to offenders, when

they ... meet in large bodies to inflict punishment on Members who offend against established rules.... I have heard but of one punishment, and that I believe is inflicted for all offences, that of the culprits for a certain period to defend himself against spears which any of the assembled multitude think proper to hurl at him. (Ebsworth, p.75)

## Trail Bikes and the Environment (cont.)

e.g., a sample of older-age people, a sample of mini-bike riders.)

The students considered that the greatest impact was: Noise on Fauna (54 points; other impacts considered very significant were: Physical damage on Flora and on Parks and Grounds, Disturbance (annoyance/danger) to Fauna, Noise on People, and Potential Vandalism to Flora and Parks and Grounds (all 44 or 43 points).

In more general terms (summations across and down), impact on fauna, and physical damage rank as most significant. It should be stressed that the pilot study only reflects the attitudes of a small group of people. People form attitudes regardless of first-hand experience or factual knowledge, and different groups of people (i.e., distinguished by age, sex, socio-economic circumstances, etc.) may possess very different sets of attitudes.

Hence, although the pilot study could be criticised on various counts, it is at least an attempt to analyse the issue of trail-mini bikes and the environment. Perhaps some interested reader might like to refine the sampling instrument and try their own investigation?

.....

Photographs in this article by courtesy of *Newcastle Morning Herald*.

Results of  
Preliminary Survey

## ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

## Trail Bikes, Mini Bikes and the Environment

## INTERACTION TABLE (MATRIX)

		CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ENVIRONMENT								TOTALS
		SOILS	FLORA	FAUNA	PEOPLE (Group A) Bush- walkers	PEOPLE (Group B) Shift- workers	PROPERTY (fences, signs, etc.	PARKS gardens grounds	MOTORISTS	
Aspects of Trail and Mini Bikes Causing Adverse Environmen- tal Impact	Mechanical (physical) damage	31	44	27	15	12	34	44	13	220
	Disturbance element (annoyance/danger)	12	30	44	40	36	11	20	25	218
	Noise	-	3(?)	54	44	44	2(?)	12	14	173
	Fumes, oil	21	39	33	26	20	4	26	8	177
	Potential vandalism	20	43	33	11	8	39	44	4	202
TOTALS		84	159	191	136	120	90	146	64	

TABLE 2

Summations for a group of 22 College students.

## The Worimi... (cont.)

[A variation of the throwing of spears at an offender was by way of the use of boomerangs or throwing sticks.] On such occasions natives were invited from adjoining tribes, such as the Awabakal, to attend. Fighting within the group was not permitted, instead one of the disputants was punished. This obviously was aimed at preserving the group. However, minor differences between members of a group were settled with one attacking with a club while the other defended himself with a shield. Another method involved exchanges of blows taken in turn on the head with a club, until one of the combatants succumbed. (See Part V: H.N.H., Vol.7, p.187.) In all such matters a very strict code of behaviour and honour was followed. Combats to the death were relatively rare, usually honour was satisfied with the infliction of some physical damage to varied degrees short of death.

Disputes between groups, such as over territorial infringement or injury to a member of a group, were settled in the following way:

When one tribe of Natives receive any injury from another, hostilities are commenced immediately; a challenge is conveyed to the tribe from whom the injury has been received; and they meet on an appointed day to decide their differences by battle. Much parlay takes place in tones of stern defiance; they menace each other by brandishing their spears, flourishing their clubs, stamping with their feet, and using every aggravating means to excite the anger of their opponents. At length they approach pushing each other about violently; tones of defiance becoming more vehement, 'till at length they are worked up to a fury, and look more like demons.... They then fall to with their heavy waddies (Clubs) upon each others heads ... till some fall and are disabled, which occasions a terrific shout or yell from the conquerors, in token of the victory: this they continue until quite exhausted, when they disperse with their heads broken and bleeding. They seldom kill each other.... (Ebsworth, pp.76-7.)

It seems that such battles were to satisfy honour and not matters of mortal combat.

The basic unit of Aborigine society was the family, and the Worimi were no exception:

Each tribe is divided into independent families ... (where) each family has its own fire and provides its own subsistence; except in a general kangaroo hunt, where the game is impounded and taken in large quantities, when it is fairly divided. (Dawson, pp.326-7.)

A family was formed after the woman was obtained, with or without her acquiescence, by the man from a neighbouring group. There

## The Worimi ... (cont.)

were several versions of this:

...if they can find opportunities they steal them, the consent of the female never being made a question in the business. When the neighbouring tribes happen to be in a state of peace with each other friendly visits are exchanged, at which time the unmarried females are carried off by either party. The friends of the girls never interfere, and in the event of making any resistance, which is frequently the case, her paramour silences her by severe blow on the head with his waddy while he is carrying her off. He keeps her at a distance till her friends are gone, and then he returns with her to his tribe; but if the girl has no objection to her suitor ... she agrees to become his gin, thus rendering abduction unnecessary and unusual. (Dawson, p.153)

Marriage was not permitted among the local groups. Wives were obtained ... either by elopement or capture. It frequently happened that the delinquent and his companions were overtaken on the return journey by the irate warriors of the woman's tribe, and a fight took place between the parties. Should the abductor's party be successful in the encounter, he retained the prize; while if the woman's kinsmen were victorious she had to return to her tribe.... Often it happened that the abducting party succeeded in returning in safety, then the young woman was given in charge to the old women at the camp and the young men took themselves to other parts for a few days. If when they returned, they found things as they left them, then the pair settled down in the old aboriginal way, but if an invading party of the woman's tribe had appeared during his absence, then the young Romeo had to await a more favourable opportunity. (McKiernan, p.887)

It seems that in the second extract the seizure would be without the prior agreement with the woman's kinsmen. However, since we are told that such seizures were successful, it seems likely that the angry retaliation may have been a matter of protocol. Marriages were outside the local group, that is, exogamous: members of each horde were not permitted to marry other members of the same horde, so they married members of other hordes of their tribe or adjoining tribes.

As revealed above, marriages were arranged by the parents and kindred. To be eligible the man had to be properly initiated into the necessary mysteries of adult membership of the tribe. (See the following article: initiation.) The girl had to be old enough to take care of her man. There was no ceremony, the man was merely led to a fire that had been prepared for him by his woman. Polygamy was uncommon and monogamy was the general rule. Partners were remarkably constant with separations a rarity. The size of families ranged from at least four members,

The Worimi...(cont.)

with two parents and two off-spring.

Within each of the hordes were a number of patrilineal totemic clans which had a bearing in kinship and marriage. That is, descent was traced through the father and marriage was forbidden between people of the same totemic clan, the prohibition extending to relatives who were second cousins or more nearly related. The totems served as symbols of each clan. The known clan totems were:

...makan, lizard; wapara, male kangaroo; womboin, kangaroo; kula, native bear; wuran, goanna; wotu, opossum; natur, water; makun, padi-melon; palbu, kangaroo-rat; baman, leech; kandwan, flying-fox; bukan, bandicoot. (Elkin, 1932, p.361)

... Black-snake, Black crow, Eagle-hawk, and Stingaree. (Bennett, p.4)

Such totems ensured that the strict laws were maintained, the tribal strength preserved and in-breeding avoided. Although there was no evidence of taboos on the killing and eating of the totems by the time that anthropologists made research this century, it is believed that such restrictions existed in the past before the advent and influence of European settlement.

This is more likely to have been the case once the full significance of totemism is revealed. Not only does it regulate marriages and kinship, but it is the Aborigines' link with their natural and spiritual environment, which is expressed through ritual and ceremony while preserved in their mythology. (See subsequent articles.)

There were sex totems which symbolized the solidarity of the sexes:

The men had as theirs the tiny bat [possibly either of the following: Bent-winged, *Miniopterus schreibersi*; Gould's wattled, *Chalinolobus gouldii*; Long-eared, *Nyctophilus geoffroyi*] that flies about at dusk, and this little winged sprite was regarded with deep veneration. He was 'gimbi', the friend of the males. With equal reverence the gins looked upon the small wood-pecker [the Brown tree-creeper, *Climacteris picumnus*; the White-throated tree-creeper, *C. leucophaea*; the Red-browed tree-creeper, *C. erythrops*], hailing his appearance with delight as presaging good fortune while he lingered in the vicinity, busy with his strong sharp bill seeking grubs under the bark of the trees. (Scott, p.9)

A third kind of totemism was the personal totem of the 'clever men', the karadji, who were older men with special

## The Worimi...(cont.)

supernatural powers. Their totems, such as spirit carpet-snake or spirit kangaroo, assist them in their clairvoyance and healing. These karadji were held in great fear because they were believed to possess supernatural powers, which made them capable of causing illness and disasters. However, their powers were used for the benefit of their own people. It was they who supervised the initiation of tribal youths into manhood.

In the next part the ceremonial features will be covered, including the corroboree, initiation ritual and burial procedure.

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- Bennett, Gordon (n.d.) *The Earliest Inhabitants—Aborigine Tribes of the District* (Dungog, Port Stephens and Gresford.)  
Dungog, Chronicle Print.
- Dawson, R. (1831) *The Present State of Australia*. London,  
Smith, Elder & Co.
- Ebsworth, H.T. "A Letter Book, kept at Sydney and Port Stephens,  
1826". Ms., Mitchell Library, B852.
- Elkin, A.P. (1961) *The Australian Aborigine*. Sydney, Angus and  
Robertson.
- , (1945) *Aboriginal Men of High Degree*. Sydney, Aust.  
Publ. Co.
- , (n.d.) *Studies in Australian Totemism*. Oceania Monograph  
No.2. Sydney, Aust. National Research Council.
- , (1932) "Notes on the Social Organization of the Worimi, a  
Kattang-Speaking People", *Oceania*, Vol.2, pp.359-62.
- Enright, W.J. (1933) "Further Notes on the Worimi", *Mankind*, I,  
161-2.
- , (1932) "The Kattang (Katthung) or Worimi: an Aborigine  
Tribe", *Mankind*, Vol.1, pp.75-7.
- , (1940) "Notes on the Aborigines of the North Coast of  
N.S.W.", *Mankind*, Vol.2, pp.321-4.
- , (1935) "The Worimi Tribe", *Journal of the Newcastle and  
Hunter District Historical Society*, Vol. 1, pp.85-9.
- McKiernan, B. (1911) "Some Notes on the Aborigines of the Lower  
Hunter River, N.S.W.", *Anthropos*, Vol.6, pp.885-9.
- Sokoloff, B. "The Worimi: Hunter-Gatherers at Port Stephens",  
*Hunter Natural History*, Vol.6, 1974, Parts 1&2, pp.166-9, 233-  
235; Vol.7, 1975, Parts 3-6, pp.28-31, 113-5, 182-8, 231-6;  
Vol.8, 1976, Part 7, pp.31-7.