

THE WORIMI: HUNTER-GATHERERS AT PORT STEPHENS

BY

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PART VI

MATERIAL CULTURE: Implements and Utensils

The implements and utensils, consisting of digging stick, dilly bag, fish hooks, baskets, containers and nets, were principally used and manufactured by the women of the Worimi tribe. As with the weapons, described in a previous article, the best natural materials were utilised.

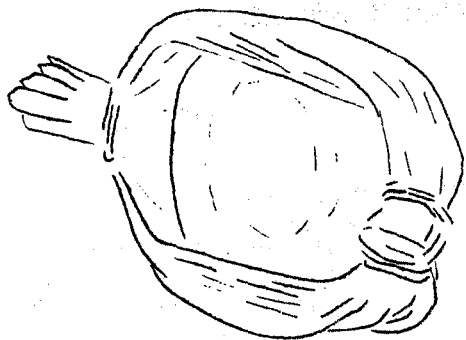
Digging sticks, called "kunni" or "wombie", were made of hardwood, one metre long and the point toughened by fire. These were used by the women in their search for edible vegetable and insectal foods, as well as in despatching any small animals they may have encountered. Also they were used to settle arguments among themselves (see Social Aspects—an article to follow).

String or cord, used for fashioning lines and nets, were made by the women from the young bark of the kurrajong trees (*Brachychiton populneum* and *B. acerifolium*) in the following way:

The bark would be stripped carefully from the tree and soaked in water until the outer portions could be readily scraped off with a shell. This left a white, flax like fibre, very tough and strong. (Scott p.18)

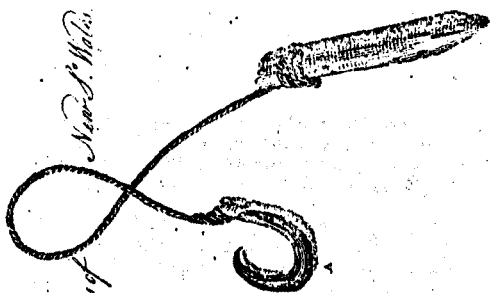
This fibre was rolled into string on the woman's thigh to the required thickness. The thigh was hardened by the application of hot ashes. The string used for fishing lines was made by women who were specially initiated (see Social Aspects).

The fishing line, called "yirrawarn", was strong enough to catch large fish. The problem was in the fish-hooks. These fish-hooks, called "birrooyee" or "pirrewuy", were made from oyster or pearl shell: rock oyster (*Crassostrea commercialis*) and probably the turban shell (*Ninella torquata*), the large earshell (*Notohaliotis ruber*), the mud oyster (*Ostrea sinuata*) and perhaps the pipi (*Plebidonax deltoides*). The process of manufacture of the hook entailed the weakening of the centre of the selected shell with heated sticks, punching a hole in the weakened section, filling the edges of the hole to the desired shape, and making a vertical break to give the crescentic shape (see illustration). Unfortunately, although the line, to which the hooks were attached, were strong, the hooks were prone to snap with large fish. This explained the natives' preference for iron hooks that the Europeans brought with them. The utensil used for filing down the hooks were pieces of fine sandstone, shale or quartzite. These fish-hook files were known as "dipoonga".



Container made of tea-tree bark.

(after : Augustus Earle)



Two kinds of New S. Wales.

from Journal of a voyage to New South Wales by J. White, 1790

The Worimi (cont.)

From the string mentioned above, the ingenious women also

...form Nets of curious Workmanship. In some the Meshes are very small and neat, and the whole knit without a knot, excepting at its completion.... (Ebsworth, p.79)

Such nets formed dilly-bags, called "butthoon", which were strung from the head by a sling down the women's backs. In them were carried small items, such as fish-hooks, broken shells, prepared bark for string, gum and food like oysters and fish. Small children and pets were known to be carried in these also. Other nets were used for fishing as well, named "burrin".

The string was also used for attaching the separate prongs of the fish spear and the hafting of stone axes (see the previous article, pp.183 and 186).

There were several types of containers used by the Worimi. One was canoe-shaped, made of tea-tree bark (*Melaleuca quinquenervia*), native name "yuppee", used for collecting such things as honeycomb, and carrying roots and other articles for food (see illustration). The ends were sewn with string of bark, or tied after folding in a "peculiar manner". These were also used as drinking vessels.

Another kind of container is procured from the trees, upon the branches of which it is found as an excrescence in which they carry several quarts of fresh water. (Dawson, p.315)

The native names for these utensils were "kittee" and "doondee".

A leg-bone of the kangaroo was formed into a comb for grooming the hair, called "kooyeroo", and needles for sewing. Shells were used for scraping spears, for scraping bark and for marking bodies. Stone artefacts were also used for dressing spear handles and boomerangs, cutting meat and skinning animals as well as scarring bodies.

Apparel and Ornaments

The Worimi were fortunate with their climatic conditions and consequently required sparse, if any, bodily covering. The men only wore a possum fur belt,

...spun or twisted like a coarse yarn, into skeins to the length of five or six yards, which was bound round [their] loins.... (Dawson, p.115)

This served the purpose of carrying such weapons and implements as the stone axe, boomerang and throwing stick or items of game secured while hunting. Sometimes narrow strips of kangaroo skin were pendant in front and behind. On ceremonial occasions, as part of their full dress, the men wore a small possum band of

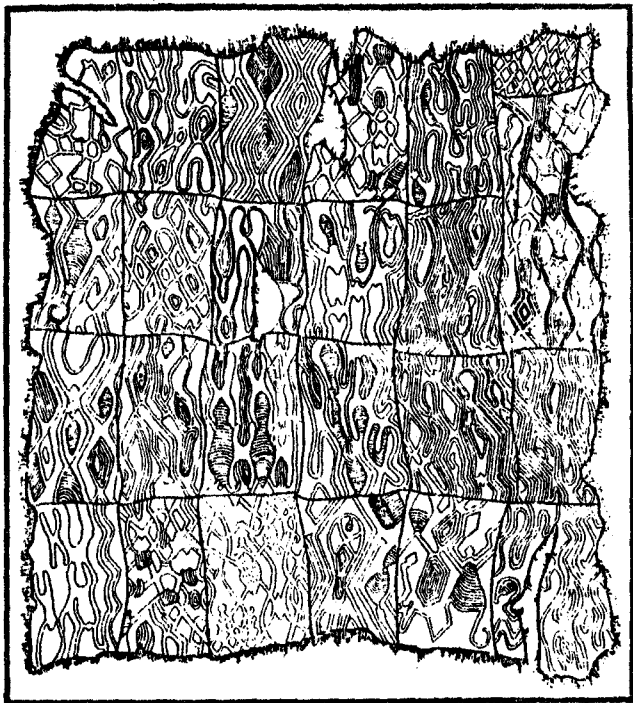


Fig. 3. Aboriginal skin rug from Hunter River, eastern New South Wales.

(from: C.P. Mountford's, "Aboriginal Skin Rugs,"
Records of the S. Aust. Museum,
Vol. 14, 1963.)

The Worimi... (cont.)

network on their forehead. They also arranged their hair in tufts, about half a metre high, with a central column of grass which protruded above the hair, bound with possum yarn (see illustration).

Both men and women wore fur cloaks in cold or wet weather. The women tended to wear the cloaks at other times as well.

The rugs they used were made of animal's skins, principally those of the opossums. They were neatly made and provided warmth and protection from rain.... (Scott, p.8)

Such cloaks (see illustration) were worn around the shoulders and secured with a bone nose-peg. The men were the only ones privileged to wear the pegs in the nose.

For ornaments the women wore necklaces or charms around their necks made of shells, seeds and pieces of quartz.

The final article on material culture of the Worimi will cover their dwellings and the construction and use of canoes.

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