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NORTHERN TOTEMS

Cornally's information

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The Northern totemic system differs from that of the south in many important particulars. Amongst the various dialectic names for totems in the Northern group are walarree (Gascoyne and Ashburton), jaaloo (Roeburne district), jalnga (Broome, Beagle Bay, Sunday Island, Derby and West Kimberley generally).

Unfortunately with the exception of West Kimberley, it has been impossible up to the present to conduct personal investigation amongst the natives of the various inland districts included in the Northern Group, but it may be assumed that many features connected with the totemic system of the West Kimberley natives will be found on later investigation to be identical with those of the district natives east and south of them.

James Cornally, a native of the Champion Bay district, and a resident of some 20 years amongst the natives in the Gascoyne and Ashburton districts, where he "shepherded" the nucleus flocks of the extensive sheep stations of the present day, gives the following account of the walarrees of the natives who were his only companions in those early days. The customs and laws of the natives of these districts had a peculiar fascination for Cornally, who possessed an intelligence far above the men of his class and occupation, and much valuable information has been the result, the greater part of it having been authenticated by evidence obtained elsewhere. Cornally was adopted into the Kaimera Class Division and a native name, equivalent to "all-seeing" was bestowed upon him because of his native shrewdness in seeing through the lies, motives and excuses of his companions, who found it impossible to "hoodwink" him. Cornally is a Kelt by descent and is consequently of "temperamental kin" to his dark companions.

The subjoined information was taken down personally from Cornally, who is now blind and has for some years been an inmate of the Old Men's Depot, and is here reproduced without addition of comment.

"Walarree is the name applied by the natives to their relationship with animals, called by white people totemism. For instance, the kangaroo is their walarree, but they are also the kangaroo's walarree. The question usually asked is, "Nganna nyinda walarree?" (What or who is your walarree?) "Banya yallabiddee walarree" (that emu my walarree) etc., will be the reply.

The man who is walarree to animals, birds, etc., believes that these will always continue to increase and multiply for his special benefit and that should all the people who have animals etc., for their walarree die, the walarree belonging to them will also die out. The walarree is the special food of those to whom it belongs, and on the death of any of their relatives, they are nganjees from their own (not the dead relation's) walarree, because that has followed its "owner"; sometimes they continue the abstinence for years. One woman was nganjee from kangaroo (her walarree) for two winters. The length of time is optional and may be carried on for many years until some person or relative suddenly rubs the mouth of the nganjee woman with the fat of the forbidden food. This must be done unawares, otherwise the abstinence continues.

Several families may have the emu, etc., for their walarree, but only a few members of all these will be nganjees, this being probably determined by the relationship of the persons undergoing the abstinence, to the deceased.

In some places eastward of the Gascoyne there are only individual walarrees, the "family" walarrees appearing to prevail mostly along the coast. I have known families east of Wandajee who had different walarrees, father, mother, sons and daughters. Some of them used to tell me that the natives were once animals and the descendants of the man who was once an emu had now the emu for their walarree, and so on with other animals.

All boys and girls were nganjees from some food until they had reached maturity by initiation and marriage, and all natives were nganjees from their own individual walarrees on the death of one or other of their parents or near relatives. While nganjees from their walarrees these were never touched or killed by them. A Champion Bay boy was nganjee from opossum until he had gone through

his initiation. The adult natives made themselves nganje, but the boys and girls were forbidden certain foods, by their fathers and mothers."

The Gaseoyne and Ashburton natives doubtless have variations of the totemic system of their more northern neighbours, but owing to the impossibility of personal investigation amongst them, Cornally's statements must be rendered as they are written. Later direct inquiries will confirm and elaborate, or will perhaps confute these statements. According to Cornally, there are only personal and family totems amongst the people of these districts, and the totem is the chief article of diet of the persons whose totem it is, except during those periods when they are nganje from their totems on the death of a relative.

As to the walarrees of the natives, the child's walarree is not necessarily that of its father or mother, nor of any of its relations. They say that their fathers before them had walarrees, but they did not always adopt the walarrees of their fathers; they apparently choose the walarrees for their babies, irrespective of whether they were their own or not. A whole family might have the same walarree, or they might all have different walarrees.

A Champion Bay boy was nganji from opossum until he had gone through the peerdawong ceremony.

All native boys and girls were nganji from some food until they were men and women and all natives were nganji from their own walarrees when their fathers or mothers or some of their relatives died. The nganji sometimes lasted for three months. Cornally had known some of them to have been nganji from food for years - not on account of mourning but in abedience to some law or tradition. They generally made themselves nganji, but in the case of a death, every one of the natives who were relatives of the dead person were nganji from their own walarrees, and they could not hurt or touch or handle their walarree while nganji.