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BURIAL CUSTOMS

Southern W.A.

BURLIAL

The Southern tribes buried their dead with the head towards the South (Meenung), knees North (Yabbaru); the feet and legs were bent backwards towards the buttocks and were fastened to the back of the thighs with mungart (jamwood) fibre. The lower arms and the hands were joined together and pressed upwards against the body and were held in position with jamwood fibre. The body was placed on its side and weeluk (red ochre) was put on cheeks, forehead and nose if the dead person were an adult man or woman. The eyes looked towards the rising sun.

The body was wrapped in its war bwok (kangaroo skin cloak) by the ngoolyarmat (brothers-in-law) of the dead man or woman, and these conducted all the ceremonies in connection with the burial. Two or more ngoolyarmat dug the mot or grave, loosening the sand or earth with wan (women's digging sticks) and lifting the loosened soil with their hands, placing it in a semicircle at the head of the grave. If the body is only a short distance from where the grave has been dug, two ngoolyarmat clasp hands and a third ngoolyar places the body on the improvised seat, while he assists in holding the feet or head according to the length of the body. Round the sides and the bottom of the grave, sheets of bark are placed, if they are found in the near locality; if not, small branches are used to cover the floor of the grave. The dead man's personal ornaments, his woogarri (headband of hair string), waistband (noolburn), string necklace (woondu) are buried with him, and his mir, gij and kairl (spearthrower, spear and boomerang) are placed on top of the mound. The barb of the spear may or may not be broken off by the ngoolyar.

Besides the semicircular mound at the head of the grave, a kent (cave) or shelter of boughs is also made by the women, ngoolyar yeg of the dead man, and a fire is placed near the kent, another fire called "beemb" being made between the grave and the new camp of the relatives.

Ngoont, jook and konk (brothers, sisters, and mother's brothers) of the dead man stand apart, but dem, ngoolyar, maam and ngank (grandparents, own mother's brothers's sons, and own father's sisters' daughters) keep close to the body. On the exact spot where the man or woman died, a miniature mot or mound is made, the ground being swept clean around it. If there are any large trees in the immediate neighbourhood, jerrail (jarrah), toourt, mungart, yerndil (species of toourt), one of these is marked, either "ringed" round the trunk, or else lines or waved patterns are drawn perpendicularly on the trunk, to show those who may be passing that way that a death occurred there.

When the body had been covered with bark and earth and the grave finished, all the members of the camp gathered round the grave, dressed in their mourning habiliments. Bilyan (white pipeclay) was smeared round one eye, a ring of moorur (charcoal) being drawn round the other. The men also placed a line of bilyan or moorur diagonally across their breasts and in some cases the dead man was decorated in the same manner.

Small branches were fixed in the woogarri (headbands) of the mourners (men), and everyone carried branches in their hands. The branches are supposed to be ngoop jeerungin (tearing the blood from the dead man).

Should the body remain a night in the camp before burial, a little fire is placed beside the noytch (dead body) and all the mourners gather round another fire near and sing the following :-

Ngoobar warun-a-warun,
Ngoobar warun,
Ngoobar gerung-a-jiring,
Ngoobar jirung-a-jiring,
Ji, ji, ji, ji.

The branches that are held in the hand are waved to and fro while the song is being chanted, the words and action having reference to the blood of the dead man, which is being "torn" from his body. All adult relatives and relatives-in-law

take part in the song and the few movements attached to it, which are merely a series of swaying of the singers in unison, and a rhythmical stamping of the feet at the refrain: "Ji, ji, ji, ji." The song and movements continue throughout the night. Just before daylight all the old men pick up their kairl and rattle these noisily for some time in order to drive the janmuk (ghost) of the dead man away.

Konk, ngoont and jook ngauat or mauat (younger sisters) keep moorur on cheeks, nose and forehead for some little time and dem jook (mother's mother) and ngank (mother) make a head covering of wet pipeclay (bilyan) which they wear until it breaks off of itself.

Should some relatives of the dead man be camped some distance away, a messenger who may be ngoont or ngoolyarmat journeys to the camp to convey the news, and if the occupants of the camp are away hunting, the messenger makes a small mot close beside the fire, with a semicircular mound round the head of the little grave. He then places a stick upright at the head of the mound and returns to his own camp. On the return of the occupants to their camp, their attention is arrested by the upright stick and a further glance gives them all the information, together with the identity of the messenger whose footprints they recognise.

While the relatives of the dead man remain in the neighbourhood, the fire between the noytech and the camp is kept alive, and not infrequently, should the camp be removed a considerable distance from the district, a mother or sister of the dead man will journey back to the old camp in order to replenish the fire.

As long as their sorrow for the dead remains poignant, so long will the mourning continue, but when the grief is fading, they know that the dead brother or son, etc., is satisfied with the sorrow and grief they have shown and is willing that they should mourn no more.

A particularly mournful "keen", whose notes forcibly recalled the old Celtic strains, was chanted by the relatives of one of the last remaining members of Albany and Two People Bay on the death of Nebinyan, a very old man (of Yilbering, Two People Bay) who died at the Katanning camp. The words were as follows :-

Waddarn-ak-wen kooling
(To the sea the dead is going)

Waddarn-ak-wen koaling,

Koord-ak-wel da-yungain
(Heart crying and giving cry)

Koord-ak-wel burrongain.
(Heart crying to bring the spirit happiness.)

The Southern dead go Marruk (S.W.) and the beemb (spirit fire) is lighted to the north east, and between the camp and the dead.

In the Ravensthorpe, Jerramungup and other districts, the natives believed that their dead went to a home or boojoor beyond the sea, whither their spirits were carried inside whatever bird the wee-urn (spirit) happened to enter, the bird at once taking the spirit to its destination.

Dabbulilup was the term applied by the dwert borungur (dog totem) people of Deep River to the home of their dead. All noytch (dead people) crossed the beel-dal-boordap (river of waiting) to go west to Dalbulilup. When the big jindung (star) falls, and the sound of the fall is heard, the dead noongar has crossed the river - jannuk beel-a-boordong koolinya, the spirit over the river has gone.

Whenever a star falls, a native dies in the direction of the falling star.

Only one trance burial is recorded in the Southern district. The burial took place at Belgarup, Yalyurgurl or Yalyurwirt, a Manitchmat and yongar borungur, appeared to have died, and in order to get away from the vicinity of the dead man at an early hour the next day, the body was hurriedly buried on the evening of the same day on which the death took place. All the attendant ceremonies were carried out, except the erection of the kont (shelter) over the grave, therefore early the next morning, before the departure of the relatives, some kwerrurt (elder sisters) of the dead man went over to replenish the beemb and to make the kont. What was their horror on coming within sight of the grave to see Yalyurgurl sitting by the embers of the beemb. They looked for a moment in horror, and then shouted aloud, "Kai, maam nyinmak noytech," (Oh! dead father's spirit sitting.) (An elderly man who has a family is called Maam by his sisters and mother when addressing him, or speaking of him to his children.) The horrified kwerrurt ran with all haste towards their camp, Yalyurgurl calling aloud to them that he was alive and not dead, "Ngain dordok, ngain dordok," (I am alive, I am alive), he said, but his voice was drowned in the shrieks of the kwerrurt as they fled in terror from the noyth.

Yalyurgurl walked slowly towards the new camp, being in a very weak state, and cried at intervals as he walked, "Ngain dordok, ngain dordok." As he approached the camp, some old men came trembling towards him, and when they saw that he was really alive, they helped him to a fire. Next day they went to his grave and found the earth scratched and torn all round the hole and seeing these marks and other signs they believed that the yongar (kangaroo) had dug Yalyurgurl out of the grave. His borungur had come to his help. "Yongar been, been, been," they said, (Kangaroo dug, dug, dug or scratched) and brought his borungur out of the grave.

Yalyurgurl died a fortnight after his premature burial, and at his second burial, after the funeral rites had been accomplished, all the members of the camp left the district and went to another camping place many miles away.

Yalyurgurl was buried at his Belgarup camp, and some years afterwards, his son's body, which had been buried near, was disinterred by some white people, and the bones scattered about the ground beside the rifled grave.

Deelungurt, Yalyurgurl's dem ngoont (grandson) would not touch the bones, which were those of his father's brother (maam), but he informed Kaiar, a Wordungmat and jennuk borungur, and a relative on the mother's side, of the dead man, that the bones were uncovered. Kaiar went over and gathered the bones and replaced them in the grave and as the dead man was yongar borungur, Kaiar made himself ngooluk from yongar ever afterwards.