

THE KAANYA OF BIRUNGAN

16.

THE SPIRIT OF THE NEWLY DEAD

In Nyitting times, Birungan was a young yogga (wife) living with her kord (husband) and two little girl children, koolongur, near Maamba. Their ground was very fertile and had warrain (roots) in great quantity growing on it and bai-yoo nuts (yamia) and mungaitch (honey bearing banksia) and plenty of bardi in the balga (blackboy trees). And the yongar and warr and goomal and walya were abundant, so that they always were fat and well fed.

Birungan dug up the warrain with her wanna and her little daughters had their own little wanna which their father made them and they went out with their mother every day and helped her gather the warrain which she brought home and cooked in the ashes. Then when the baiyoo nuts were ripe and red they gathered these and buried them for some days "to take the poison away", or they put them in water which took a shorter time to remove the poison than burying. Birungan told her children that Walya (the wallaby) told them to do this, and showed them how to do it so that kalleepgur could always prepare the baiyoo nuts properly and so not get poisoned.

There were always bardi in the balga and these the children loved to dig out and eat and sometimes one would say to the other, "By and by when this balga gets bardi it will be mine," and each would choose the balga they were to own before the grubs had come into its roots, for all balga in time get bardi in their roots. Then the children ate as they picked them out with a bundee (skewer) or with their fingers, for the bardi of the balga were easily got.

Then when the mungaitch flowers held the honey they pulled the flowers down with a long stick barbed or hooked at the top so that it could catch the branches easily and pull them down. They put the honey flowers in water and made a sweet drink of them, or they just sucked the honey from each flower as they gathered them. Their mother told them they must never touch the young blossoms of the mungaitch, for if they did the demmar goomber would get sulky and there would be no honey sent. Always their father

placed a little goomal fur wrapped round some leaves of the mungaitch in the forks of the trees and by doing this he always knew that there would be plenty of mungaitch. All good foods have a law attached to them and jungar must keep and follow this law or the food will go away.

So they lived very happily all together and went visiting their moorurt on the seacoast and in the river country, until one day when Birungan was bringing some wood for her kala she stopped some fire magic that was on its way to a jungar who had stolen a woman from the north. The magic went inside Birungan and she died. Oh! great was the sorrowing and mourning and loud was the crying of kord and koolongur and manmangu and nyangegur and demmangur and all their moorurt. Birungan who was kind and good and generous, giving, giving to all who came to Maamba and seeing that her visitors had always plenty of root and vegetable foods. The women put white pipeclay on their faces and cut themselves and scratched themselves in their sorrow till they made the blood flow. The men too who belonged to the group of the woman for whom the magic was intended, cut themselves to show that they were not to be blamed, and that they too were sorry their jookan (sister) was gone.

They took Birungan by a roundabout way from her camp to a place on the hillside where they buried her. They then moved their own camps some distance away, putting a little fire halfway between the grave and the new camp, for Birungan's spirit to warm itself.

But Birungan loved her kord and her koolongur greatly and though the kaanya (spirit) of the dead will hover round its home for a time before it goes to Kurannup - the home of the dead beyond the western sea - Birungan's kaanya would not go to Kurannup. They could hear the kaanya alighting on the tree - the bush which Western Australians call Christmas Bush, and sometimes breaking off a branch as it alighted on the tree. Her Kord said, "Kaanya won't go to Kurannup without the koolongur," but he loved his children too, and would not let them go, and watched them, and put fires between them and the kaanya, but still he could hear the branches breaking, and he knew the kaanya was close by. And at night in their sleep the children would sometimes call to their nganga to bring them warrain and jilga

and other roots, and Birungan's kaanya would get more and more restless and wandering.

When the heavy rains came Wanil could not keep the fires alight and at last one night the fires went out and Birungan's kaanya reached the children who soon died and went away to Kurannup with their nganga, whose kaanya was now at rest. Heavy with carrying her children, the kaanya broke a great branch of the kaanya tree at Maamba as she stood on it before finally wending her way to Kurannup, from which she never returned. For once the kaanya goes through the sea to Kurannup it can never come back, and her kord and her people could now remain quietly at Maamba and could forget Birungan and not be sorry any more.