

Daisy Bates Papers

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Series 2: 'Native Testaments of old natives;

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Notes on Nebinyan's story of Flinders' arrival in King George Sound Dec. 1801

Nebinyan was a very old man when I first met him in 1906 but he gave me this story at my Katanning camp in 1908 or 1910, which at that time held 40 measles patients, men women and children under my sole care and tendance. He was the last member of the Two People Bay and Doubtful Island Groups whose areas were visited by Flinders in the Investigator in December 1801 and who, with his crew, were the first white people they had ever seen.

[Margin note: I did not know Flinders had been in W.A. waters when Nebinyan gave me his grandfather's memories of the ship]

These natives called themselves "Bibbulmun" and "Bibbuluk, the word 'Bibbul' meaning 'breasts' and 'mun' and 'uk' "belonging to" and meant "a group with (or owning) many women".

The belief held by all the Bibbulmun groups was that the "Heaven" of their people was a country which they called "Kurennup" the "home" or "place" of their dead which lay beyond the Western Sea and every man who died immediately began the journey under the sea to his Kurannup Home.

Halfway on that undersea road there was a barrier consisting of a great cockatoo's nest, which the man must get through by his own endeavours before he could continue his journey. This obstacle overcome, he continued his journey and as he neared the shore of Kurannup, he looked about and caught a fish or animal to present to his Kurannup people who would be assembled on the shore to greet him. The group gave him food to eat and when he had eaten he went to sleep. He saw that they were all Jangga spirits, white Bibbulmun and he lay down after he had eaten, he fell asleep and while he slept, his people removed his own dark skin and when he woke he saw that he was white, the same as all his Kurannup kin who had gone before him and were waiting for him on Kurannup shores.

The only meaning I could find of Koorannup is 'Kooraa' meaning 'long ago' ('up' place of) or 'belonging to'. Long long ago, all Koorannup men were white skinned and the name given them by the Bibbulmun groups was Jangga – Spirits of the newly dead, Janggara or Jangganuk, a group of newly dead Jangga.

There was evidently no one in Flinders' personnel who was interested in the words or sounds or exclamations that came from the older natives whom they encountered, or who tried to set down the "sound" or words of exclamation that came from the elders of the group near the ship. "They were shy but not afraid" wrote Flinders. They were not afraid because their visitors were their own people – the spirits (Jangga) of their own dead and during the four weeks stay of the ship in King Georges Sound, those shy but fearless men searched the faces of the kurannupjangga, noted their walk etc. and saw a resemblance to some of their own people whom they still remembered. Their visitors had returned to their own ground as Jangga to visit their own Kalleep ('Kal' – fire, home, hearth) and they wandered about the area and exchanged " kindly gestures and friendliness" with their earthly Kalleep gur and show their earthly friends that they were "still alive" in Koorannup, ,

still friendly, but with “different dialects”. The crew’s readiness to comply with their gestures when some forbidden ground was being approached by their “Jangga” kinsmen confirmed every belief held by the men who were “taking note” of every gesture made by the visitors.

Flinders’ beautiful “brain wave” as he would call today the “happy thought” he had of giving his well behaved friends a “review of his Marines” with their red and white uniforms, their bayonets shining in the sunlight, their own fife (particularly the fife; their own “drums” were of piled earth and round these they sat, each man with a drumstick of good strong wood, which was beaten upon the mound rhythmically and in unison, and the sound of which would be heard by all the group.) The fife notes “might be” Kurannup sounds” and were evidently not “imitated” by any Bibbulmun group.

No women were seen throughout Flinders’ stay but were probably within long view of the Kurannup visitors and kept strictly aloof from the vicinity of the ship and its crew of Jangganuk (spirit people). The Bibbulmun thought there were “spirit-women” (Janggalog women on board the Investigator who were being kept designedly out of view perhaps through jealousy and it may be that they discussed this subject in camp and one yangan (man) and his mate who had been invited to go to the ship and entered the boat to have a glimpse as they thought of the Jangga yog (“spirit-women”) lost heart after a few strokes of the oars and signed to be set down on shore again, which the boats crew understood and at once complied with.

The quiet departure of the ship on January 5th with its ‘Jangga Kalleepgur’ (spirit home folk) was in keeping with its quiet arrival. It left King George’s sound on January 5th, 1802 and returned to Kurannup according to Nebinyan’s groups’ belief, but leaving the Bibbulman Yungan (man) the wonderful Kurannup kening (dance).

Every man amongst them from the oldest men to those “younger ones” who were permitted to join the Elders’ groups, had been repeating and imitating every aspect, every movement, every symbol shown them, their very own ceremonial colours – wilgi (red ochre) and pipeclay and the Kurannup patterns were simple, wilgied torso and white cross bands on top of the wilgi; and they remembered the movements of each member in the ranks, the old men and elders had swung their own clubs in close imitation of the bayonet exercises. Their clubs were thick enough to show any markings of rust while that might represent the markings on the kurannup ‘clubs’ (muskets).

After Flinders’ departure, the Kurannup Kening was learned and studied and practised and shown to their own groups and their related groups west and north and east of them. Such a precious and wonderful Kurannup kening was the most valuable asset for the special little group that obtained it and at each of their tribal ceremonies it would be the special Kening. When the young boys were taken amongst their kindred groups east and north of them, accompanied by their mothers’ brothers (uncles—“Konk”) and other relations in law, the story of the Koorannup visitors and their Kening was carried to all their related groups amid much ceremony and always good will for the young beedawa who was being taken and presented to all his outlying kin and kind and shown to each beedawa visited group and to remain a while (with his keepers) while the group danced and sang and made much of the Beedawa’s special visit and the story of the “Kurannup” visitors was told to excited hearers in every camp. The Beedawa’s ‘education’ was carried out in each camp. He learned the necessary ‘laws’ of his father’s people, all the special relationships, all the rules of avoidance of those with whom he must never have direct communication and the special continuing and close avoidance of every woman and girl and child in every group. He neither spoke to, nor was

approached or addressed by any woman his predecessors had visited before him. The men in charge of him kept unwinking watch always but there was great friendliness throughout, as in such and such groups his mothers or grandmothers might have been born and lived-in and those men who had charge of beedawa (from beeda-kin) would have their blood relations in some camp and from the woman – a baby (still unborn) might be promised to one beedawa.

Special songs of the groups might be sung and there would be intense joy when perhaps on some quiet night – after their full meals from the group they were visiting – his big brothers in law might say to the boy “You sing for them” and presently a great quiet would be over the camp and the tremulous young voice of the beedawa would float on the air and a surge of joy run through the whole group.

And in the morning the beedawa departed to the next related group where all was in readiness for them and so he would be shown to all his own people’s relations as far as such went and then came the return journey back to his own father’s people’s group, followed by contingents from every group visited, who came laden with gifts and barter goods and foods. The journey back was quickly made and just before he reached his father’s Kal (fire home) he would be wigged all over his body and would wear many gifts of fur string and feathers on his body and decorated with Bibbulmun markings on breast and arms etc and then carried on his future brother in law’s shoulders to a spot where a heavily ochred kangaroo rug of seven kangaroo skins had been made and spread and covered with beedawa gifts from every group visited and on this he would be lowered or thrown by his brother in law and a great and rejoicing wailing would come from every visiting group. The beedawa finally rose from the rug a Junger (Man)

(P6a scrap Nebinyan – S.W. Kobbara Jangga (“Spirit”-ship and Spirit-men)

and presently move away with the other beedawa who had been sent North and Norwest and Noreast through their Bibbulmun people.

Then followed dancing and bartering and of course some beginning of the Kurannup Kening. Dances of such significance took a long time to perfect and I could find no trace of the Kurannup Kening other than two songs I heard sung in the 1900s by a highly civilized full blooded woman whose father’s group owned the Port Augusta area. They are evidently relics of “composed verses” of the first actors of the Heavenly Dance.

The dance previously brought much barter and many groups to the group area during the beedawa ceremonies and as each beedawa final performance at the young boy’s own group area, all his father’s related groups who are present, with goods for barter and exchange, would bring their women and at these dances, every woman, young and old, puts aside her wanna – her one protection- and she is chosen by the men of the visiting groups and gifts paid her menkind in bartered goods. This was the “wanna wa” (“woman’s stick gone”, woman’s stick where?). At all these special periods women were bartered, the men paying in string or weapon or some such to the woman’s owners. The women were all for barter to the visitors, though local products would also be bartered with the visiting groups.

