

Daisy Bates Papers

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Series 2: 'Native Testaments of old natives;

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At my camp near Katanning South Western Australia in 1906-8, old Nebinyan, about 86 or more, was the last and only living member of the old Southern Albany Group of "Bibbulmun" who lived and owned south coastal areas (now known as Albany, Augusta, etc.) when a strange "object" entered the waters now known as "Princess Royal Harbour" and out from this 'object', - (which Nebinyan's grandfathers called "Kobbara" (boat? ship?)) came "Jangga" (spirits of their dead people) walking as they themselves walked but "white Jangga". The frightened men watched from their hiding bushes and saw these Jangga moving about as though they belonged to the place, without fear or halting, like "Kalleep gur" ("fire" or "home" men?)

Nebinyan's grandparents' group were thus descendants of the first-comers to this southern area, crossing the continent from some northern point and evidently keeping near the west coast all the way down from North to South. How long ago - none can tell. They had lived and flourished at their 'stopping point' - right on Western Australia's southern coastal areas. They brought their own strict social systems with them. Their two "phratries" were white cockatoo and crow between whom marriage was legal, and their descent was paternal. They had also an ordered system "which forbade what we call cross cousin ' marriages by which no family group could intermarry within itself and as the group's numbers increased during those long ages, the younger members of this gurr group? were apportioned certain areas, north west or east of the first comers by their elders and westward along the northern coast until at the time of my investigations (about 1906 or earlier) this original group with paternal descent had covered the whole of that S and S. Western portion of Australia to some point below Busselton W.A. All were Bibbulmun and all had kept their strict marriage laws when I learned of these primary classes of the white cockatoo and black crow. I was shown how to distinguish the types from 'colour' and 'type'.

These Bibbulmun also extended their group areas eastward along the coast and were still "white cockatoo and black crow" when I met their last descendants - two old men - at Esperance Bay in 1912. This was their eastern boundary.

Breaches of this marriage law meant death.

They had established their group areas northward and eastward and they had made the special 'food' products of these areas their "elder brothers" - borunggur (called "totems" by American Indians) fish totems - Kalda (sea mullet) Melok (salmon) became their 'borunggur' when they saw the first '?spate' of those fishes into their estuaries etc: animal totems - kangaroo etc, emu, mallee hen were borunggur of groups in the group areas where these were plentiful and songs were made and sung for the increase of these "elder brothers" (borunggur).

They were an uncircumcised people but every Bibbulmun boy had to undergo a long period of preparation and teaching before he was allowed "manhood" in his group. He was taught all his duties: avoidances of women, kinships, duties to his own relations and to his relations in law etc and when the time came that his elders thought him sufficiently grounded in these vital "lessons", he was sent, under escort of brother in law, brother or mothers brother (uncle) on a visit more or less

prolonged to every “associated” group which made occasion to welcome the young lad a “Beedawa” (beeda-blood vein, (blood relationship), wa-a term meaning a temporary dispensation of blood relationship and allowing (in the beedawa’s honour) promiscuous intercourse between the boy’s guardians and each group visited – the boy himself being partly hidden from the group visited, especially from its women and girl children, who must not look at him or speak to him. His guardians could associate with the group during the visit and all would be well fed – the boy’s guardians or some young boys taking beedawa’s food to him, and small rejoicings might take place and perhaps some baby, born or unborn, might be ‘promised’ for the boy, who would thus be made “daajeluk” (betrothed) to the baby. All the groups visited by the Beedawas guardians were “relations” and “relations in law” to the boy’s own group, thus following the Bibbulmun marriage laws which in this way avoided “cross cousin” marriages.

When the beedawa had been taken to the outermost group, the return journey to his own father’s group’s own area was made, and some members of every group began to collect their foods and “presents” for the Beedawa’s group and objects for barter and follow the Beedawas return journey which was made quickly and with no stoppages.

The boy’s own group made its own preparations for the return, collecting its foods, presents, articles of barter etc etc, the occasion being timed so that the edible totems of the boy’s own people would be most plentiful – mallee hen season, salmon season, mullet season etc, - and dances (called kening in the S.W. of W.A. would be practiced and arranged, and on the day of the return of the beedawa, he and his guardians would be decorated with their respective emblems etc – ochre, white pipeclay, feathers. Ochred kangaroo skin rugs (7 skins made one good rug) would be placed where the beedwa group would stop and deliver the boy on to the kangaroo rug, no more “beedawa” now but Yungar (man).