

Australian Folk-Tales

R. H. Mathews

First published in *Folk-Lore*, vol. 20 (1909), pp. 485-87.

The first of the following tales was told to me by an old blackfellow whom the white people called 'Jerry'. He spoke the Jirringañ language, a grammar of which I published in 1902,¹ with the habitat of the Jirringañ tribe. The story of the Wahwee is current among the Wiradjuri, Kamilaroi, Wailwan, and other tribes of New South Wales. It was related to me by an old Kamilaroi black-fellow, named 'Jimmy Nerang', whom I met at the Bora ceremony held at Tallwood in 1895.² The Rev. Wm. Ridley mentions the Wawi (my Wahwee) as a monster living in deep waterholes.³ I gave a drawing of the Wahwee represented on the ground at the Burbung ceremonies of the Wiradjuri tribe in 1893.⁴ (The two tales have, since their dispatch to *Folk-Lore*, been printed in the *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales*.)

1. *The Yarrroma*.—Yar'-ro-mas are men of gigantic stature, with their body covered with hair, and having a large mouth which enables them to swallow a blackfellow alive. There are always two of these creatures together, and they stand back to back so that they can see in every direction. Their means of locomotion is by a series of long jumps, and every time their feet strike the ground they make a loud noise like the report of a gun or the cracking of a stock whip.

These men have large feet, shaped differently to those of a human being. When a Yarrroma is heard in the vicinity, the people must keep silent, and rub their hands on their genitals. Some of the head-men or 'doctors' call out the name of some place a long way off, with the object of inducing the Yarrroma to start away to that locality. If this *ruse* does not succeed, the head-men get sticks which have been lighted in the fire,—a fiery stick in each hand,—and strike them together so as to emit sparks, and the Yarrroma then disappears into the ground, making a flash of light as he does so.

If a man is out in the bush alone, and is pursued by Yarromas, his only means of escape is to jump into a large waterhole, and swim about, because the monsters cannot wet their feet. They sharpen their teeth on the rocks in high mountains, and the natives aver that they know of rocks where marks of this grinding can still be seen.

On one occasion a blackfellow went under a fig-tree to pick up ripe figs which had fallen to the ground, when a Yarrroma, who was hidden in a hollow at the base of the tree, rushed out and caught him and swallowed him head first. It

happened that the victim was a man of unusual length, measuring more than a foot taller than the majority of his countrymen. Owing to this circumstance, the Yarroma was not able to gulp him down farther than the calves of his legs, leaving his ankles and feet protruding from the monster's mouth, which kept it open, and thus allowed a passage for the air to descend to the man's nostrils, which saved him from suffocation. The Yarroma, feeling a nausea something like what occurs when a fish bone or other substance gets stuck in one's throat, went to the bank of the river close by, and had a drink of water to moisten his oesophagus, thinking by this means to suck down the remainder of his prey and complete his repast. This was all to no purpose, however, and, becoming sick, the Yarroma vomited the man out on the dry land. The man was still alive, but he feigned to be dead, so that he might possibly get a chance of running into the water. The Yarroma then started off to get his comrade to come and help him to carry the dead man to their camp, so that they might cook and eat him. He wished, however, to make quite sure that the man was dead before he left him, so he walked a little distance and returned, but the man lay perfectly still. The Yarroma got a stalk of grass and tickled the man's feet, but the latter remained quiet; then the Yarroma tickled the man's nose with the grass, but the man did not move a muscle. Finally the Yarroma took a bull-dog ant, and made it sting him, but still the man never flinched. The Yarroma then, thinking the man was certainly dead, started off for help, and when he got a sufficient distance away, the man, seeing his opportunity, got up and ran into the water close by, and swam to the opposite side. His friends, who happened to come there just at that time, waved burning sticks in the air, and the Yarroma dived into the ground and vanished from their sight.

2. *The Wahwee*.—The Wahwee, a serpent-like monster, lives in deep waterholes, and burrows into the bank beneath the level of the water, where he makes his den. He has a wife and a son, but they camp in a different place. A 'doctor' or clever blackfellow can sometimes go and see a Wahwee, but on such occasions he must paint himself all over with red ochre. He then follows after the rainbow some day when there is a slight shower of rain, and the end of the rainbow rests over the waterhole in which is the Wahwee's abode. On reaching this waterhole, the man dives in under the bank, where he finds the Wahwee, who conducts him into the den, and sings him a song which he never heard before. He repeats this song many times in the presence of the Wahwee, until he has learnt it by heart, and then starts back to his own people. When they see him coming, painted and singing a new song, they know he has been with the Wahwee, and a few of the other head-men and clever fellows take him into the adjacent bush, where they strip pieces of bark off trees, on which they paint different devices in coloured clays. All the people of the tribe are then mustered, and these ornamented pieces of bark are taken to the corroboree ground, where everyone sings and dances. This is how new songs and corroborees are obtained.

ENDNOTES

¹ RHM 1902, 'The Aboriginal Languages of Victoria', *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales*, vol. 36.

² RHM 1896, 'The Bora of the Kamilaroi Tribes', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, vol. 9 (new series).

³ Ridley, William 1875, *Kamilaroi, and other Australian Languages*, Thomas Richards, Government Printer, Sydney, p. 138.

⁴ RHM 1896, 'The Būrbūng of the Wiradthuri Tribes', *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, vol. 25, p. 315.