

The Mũlyerra Initiation Ceremony

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The following pages offer a brief account of the initiation ceremonies carried out by the Kũrnũ, a native tribe of New South Wales. This tribe inhabits lands on both banks of the Darling river from Bourke downstream to near Tilpa, as well as north and southwards into the hinterland of the Darling extending over large stretches of country.

The custom of induction in force among the Kũrnũ is known by the name of *Mũlyerra*, and as a description of it has not been attempted by any previous author, it is hoped that the following details will be sufficiently extensive to allow a comparison with similar ceremonies in other parts of New South Wales. The details described here I have myself learned from intelligent old natives of the Kũrnũ tribe, whose veracity I could trust. In addition, I tested this information by obtaining a description of the ceremony from people from different parts of the tribal area and found that their information matched very well.

When the number of boys who are old enough for initiation is deemed sufficient, the head man, whose task it is to call the community together, sends messengers to all neighbouring tribes. The head man does not undertake this step of his own accord, but after considerable deliberation with the elders of his people. Two Messengers, the *buruki*, went together, accompanied by a young man, who had been admitted to the previous Mũlyerra. These men carried a *mũlyi* with them as signs of their standing,¹ consisting of a piece of wallaby skin cut into small strips, which were tied together at one end, while the others were loose. Some feathers were attached to the tied end of the *mũlyi* fastened to it with a string. The messengers were also equipped with a *wilpabulka* or man's belt and a bullroarer, *yantamakaddya*. Upon the arrival of the messengers at the camp of a tribe that they had been instructed to summon, the procedure was more or less the same as that I have described in my reports about the initiation ceremonies of the Kamilaroi, Wirradayuri, Darkinyung and other tribes, and can therefore be summarised as follows. The bearers of the message on

approaching the boundaries of the camp of the foreign tribe sat down in view of the dwellings of the single men and made friendly signs. Some of the old men then walked over to them and led them to the special meeting place of the initiated men where they were brought before all the chiefs and warriors. After a while they then brought forth the *mũltyi*, *wilpabulka*, *yantamakaddya* and other things entrusted to them and recited the oral message concerning the time and place of the Mũltyerra.

In the course of several days the invitation is sent on to the next tribe. This is done either by the same messengers or by the head man they had visited. When the latter course is chosen, the head man selects suitable men from his own tribe to act as messengers, to whom he then hands over the *mũltyi*, bullroarer and other emblems received. These men now move on to the next tribe and the process is repeated until the whole community is invited. It is important to point out that every chief, when making his invitation, selects messengers who belong to his own phratry,² and sends them to other men of the same phratry among the invited tribes. The men are also often from the same totem as their chief.

While the messengers are away making the invitations, the men of the host tribe are busy preparing the common meeting place. The location chosen is a place with fairly even ground close to water where firewood is obtainable. It is also chosen in a part of the tribal hunting grounds where sufficient game exists to provide a supply of food for the people being hosted for the duration of the ceremonies. The people of the place itself are the first to set up the dwellings, and the other invited tribes camp around it, each situated in the direction of the region from where it has come.

In the vicinity of this main camp a round space called the *mũltyeragara*, about 25 or 30 yards (22.9-27.4 m) in diameter, is cleared of all wood and grass and the surface made flat. A small footpath, formed by removing the ground and by throwing loose soil onto one side, leads from the *mũltyeragara* to another similarly cleaned place, called the *bũlkinya* about 15 or 20 chains (300-400 m) distant, or sufficiently far away to be out of sight of the main camp. Inside the *bũlkinya* a few small hills called *kunya* are formed by laying several pieces of wood on the surface of the ground and covering them with loose soil.

The messengers stay with the tribe to which they were sent until the time comes to depart for the appointed meeting place. All men, women and children were then gathered and the journey to the *mũltyeragara* started. As soon as the common camp place was approached, a stopover was made and the women, children and old people stayed there with the luggage. The men then march in single file in sinuous lines toward the *mũltyeragara* where the people from the place itself and all the other tribes which had arrived earlier, had gathered already. As soon as the newcomers had reached the *mũltyeragara* they marched

around inside it until the last man was inside the cleared space. The novices brought by this tribe for initiation were in the middle of this human throng.

After they had come to a halt they all turned their faces toward the direction of the land they had come from, and the chiefs called the names of their main fighting places, water holes, hills, totem animals, and so forth. The names of shady trees, flowering and fruit-bearing trees and bushes were mentioned. Likewise the men called out the names of the genitalia of both sexes. While the men announced this they aimed their boomerangs at their own land and stomped the ground with their feet.

After this reception had ended the novices brought by this contingent were led by their guardians³ to a part of the camp which was set apart for the accommodation of the novices belonging to all tribes present. This place is called the *wilyarunga*, and the novices accompanied by their guardians are accommodated on that side which is closest to their homeland. In the meantime the women and children, who had been left behind with the luggage, approached in the company of some young men and settled down on their own side of the common camp place.

One or two weeks and, in some cases, a much longer time passes between the arrival of the first tribe and the last contingent invited from the surrounding districts so that the early arrivals had to wait a good time in the main camp. During this time corroborees were held nearly every fine night during which the different contingents took it in turns to provide the evening entertainment. Every native camp is kept free of refuse; when the people want to meet the call of nature, they make a hole in the ground and cover the defecation with soil.

As soon as seems appropriate after the arrival of all tribes whose participation in the ceremonies is expected, the chiefs assemble and after deliberations amongst themselves nominate the day on which the novices are to be taken for initiation. The *thünthurra* or mob of men who have to undertake the ceremonies in the bush is chosen. The location where the women have to erect a new camp and await the return of the novices is also nominated. The part of the tribal area into which the novices are to be brought while they undergo the initiation test is considered and decided.

On the day following the meeting, a big yard called the *gūlpi* is created with branches close to the *mültyeragara*. This yard has approximately the shape of a horseshoe, open at one side. At nightfall all the women and children of the camp are gathered in the *gūlpi* and remain there for the entire night. During the evening some men who camp on the *bülkinya* let the bullroarers sound.

The next morning, at the break of dawn, the novices are woken and lifted to the shoulders of their overseers, by whom they are carried from the *mültyeragara* to the *gūlpi*, where they are set down on green leaves thickly strewn

on the ground. The boys of each tribe are placed in one group at the side of the *gūlpi* which is closest to their land. The old men then take some nardoo and grind it into flour between two stones and spread it on small trough-shaped pieces of bark which serve as plates. Every novice is then handed one of these pieces of bark with its contents and instructed to eat the nardoo dough. After the boys have enjoyed this food, each is given a small drink of water, after which they take another sip, with which they rinse their mouth, and spit it out. This procedure is to clean the mouth and assist the later extraction of a tooth. Every novice is then painted in his tribe's usual way and clothed with a belt and other things which are the prerogative of a native man.

All women are gathered in the *gūlpi* and covered with branches, blankets and grass. They are told that this is done to hide them from the gaze of the evil being who will come to the boys, but the real reason is to prevent them from seeing any of the following events.

When these preparations are finished the men in the immediate proximity begin to let the *yantamakaddya* sound, and some men come along the path from the *būlkinya* and run around the *mūltyeragara* beating the ground with a piece of bark they hold in their hand. These pieces of bark are about the length of a man's arm and about four inches wide at the widest point, but taper off towards the end held with the hand. All men standing around the *mūltyeragara* and the *gūlpi* cheer and bang their weapons together. During this combined noise of the bullroarers, the shouting and the hitting of the ground, the guardians, the *ngutthaddya*, grab the novices by the arm and lead them away. Their heads are lowered onto their chests, and they are prohibited from looking at anything.

All boys have to march away to a clear patch of ground close to the *būlkinya*, and each of the novices has one of the upper middle incisors knocked out in the following way: one man lies with his whole length face down on the ground. The guardian supported by some strong men grabs the boy and throws him down lengthwise with his face up onto the back of the man lying on the ground. An old man who is used to this work, then sits astride the chest of the boy, who is kept in his position by the other men. The surgeon then grabs the face of the boy and opening his mouth pushes the gums back with his thumbnail and then knocks out the tooth with a strike of the thin sharp end of his *nulla-nulla*. Then he takes the tooth with his fingers and holds it up, visible to all.

After all the novices have been operated on, they and their guardians are led away into the bush by the *thūnthurra* who are responsible for all events, and towards evening they reach some suitable camp places where a yard is made out of branches in which the boys sleep in the company of their overseers. During this night, as well as during the time they are kept in the bush by the *thūnthurra*,

the novices are fed with young possums, widgeons, teals, nardoo, yams, and other vegetable foods.

Between the camp place of the men and the yard in which the boys are kept is a place cleared of all loose debris and lit with one or more fires to give enough lighting. After the boys have taken supper they are brought out of their yard and sat down facing the fire while the *thūnthurra* perform various pantomimes and traditional songs. The performances consist mainly of imitations of animals with which the audience is familiar, or with scenes from everyday life; and like the ceremonies of other primitive peoples they are amply accompanied by obscene gestures. Some of the animals chosen are the totems of the people present, while others are connected with myths and superstitions prevalent among the people.

During the day the men go hunting to provide the whole community with food, but the novices stay in the camp under the supervision of some overseers. Some days may be spent in one camp, or every night a new camp place may be reached, especially when game is sparse. In the latter case the novices of course have to accompany the other men.

Among the numerous burlesques to instruct and entertain the novices are the following. Some of these performances occur at night-time by the glow of the campfire, while others are performed during the afternoon.

The novices are brought to a place where one of the *thūnthurra* is lying on the ground, apparently in the final death throes. Some men walk around him, imitating crows and occasionally making a peck with their mouth towards the 'nobler part',⁴ which makes the dying man moan. Now and then one of the 'crows' pecks at the penis of the man.

At another time the men hop around and act like the birds known as 'native companions'.⁵ Sometimes a few men impersonate kangaroos jumping busily, pursued by the *thūnthurra* who throw spears and clubs after them.

One of the games at the camp fire at night consists of two or three men each taking a dry piece of a stick and, after lighting one end, sticking the other between the thighs as close to the buttocks as possible. The burning end of the stick is behind, and when the men jump or walk around they seem to have glowing tails.

One afternoon the *thūnthurra* erect a *gurli*—a hut built from green branches and bark. After twilight some of the old men pretend that it will rain and suggest that the boys are to be brought into the *gurli* as shelter. This is done immediately and a hearty fire is lit to keep them warm. Soon the men pretend to fight and a group of them surrounds the *gurli*, lifting burning pieces of wood, coals and ash from the fire, and throwing them into the building, at which some of the hot projectiles fall onto the boys. After a while the uproar abates and the novices

are brought from the *gurli* back into the camp, and everybody retires for a night's rest.

On another day the novices are brought to a place where some old or middle-aged men lie on the ground, their bodies painted with a mixture of burned grass and fat and wearing fanciful ornaments in their hair. One of the overseers pretends that he can see a star in the light part of the sky and asks the boys to look in that direction. He points with his finger and says *burli, burli, burli* (star, star, star). After the novices have gazed for a while without finding the star they are allowed to cast their eyes down. In the meantime the painted men have stood up and started to swing bullroarers. As the lightness of the sky has momentarily blinded the eyes of the boys while they were peering for the star in vain, they are unable to see very clearly and therefore the scene in front of them seems to be the more supernatural and intimidating. Some armed warriors now step in front of the novices and warn them that if they ever convey one of the ceremonies they have seen in the bush to an uninitiated person or woman, they will be killed. Each novice is warned by a man who does not belong to his own tribe.

I must now lead the reader back to the *mũltyeragara* and *gulpi* where the women and children were left behind, covered with branches etc., as described above. Shortly after the guardians, boys and others were out of sight, the cover was taken off by some men who stayed behind to supervise the women. Then they packed their things and moved to another location, some miles away, where they pitched a new camp with every tribe choosing its accommodation on that side of the camp place which was situated in the direction of its homeland. This same camp may be inhabited during the whole time the novices are away, or the women can change it every few nights to another location in accordance with the movements of the *thũnthurra*. A patch of ground, called *butthuwullu*, close to each of these camp places, is cleaned, and every evening the mothers and sisters of the novices go to it to attend to traditional singing during the time of the absence of the boys.

The time spent by the novices in the bush, during which they undergo the initiation ceremonies, is about two to three weeks depending on the weather and other circumstances. Every day and evening different performances take place, but the overall character of the events is the same. When the instruction of the novices is completed the chiefs send messengers to the women with the information that the boys will be brought back to them the following evening. At twilight the *thũnthurra*, overseers and novices approach the women's camp. Some of the men at the back of the procession let bullroarers sound to bestow upon the ceremonies the appropriate solemnity. The boys are allowed to go to the *butthuwullu* where they are sat down with downcast heads. The mother of each novice now approaches and touches him gently with a piece of bark she

holds in her hand. All mothers then retreat from the *butthuwullu* to their own camp. The novices are brought to a place prepared for them a little distance away from the accommodation of the men.

It should be noted that the bullroarers used during the leading away of the novices from *gulpi*, while similarly shaped, have different names to those used at the return of the boys to the *butthuwullu*. The first ones are called *yantamakaddya*; the latter *waminggulli*. In addition there is a smaller bullroarer called *nyugara* used in connection with the *waminggulli* when the boys are being brought back to the *butthuwullu*.

After a few weeks the novices are again taken close to the women's camp and they have to stand in thick smoke made by burning green bushes, placed on the fire for this purpose.

Now the initiation ceremonies have ended, the tribes present as guests prepare to start their return trip and a few days later most of them are on their way back, each tribe taking its novices with them. The boys are placed for a considerable time under the control of the elders and have to observe certain rules which are set out by the old men. It is also necessary that they participate in one or more further Mültyerra ceremonies until they are fully familiar with the different parts of the ceremony and can be admitted to full membership as men of the tribe.

ENDNOTES

¹ [Editor's note] Germ. *Wuerde*—dignity, laureateship, honorableness, portliness.

² [Editor's note] *Phratry* was Mathews' usual term for 'moiety'. The observation reveals how the moiety system applied across diverse communities.

³ [Editor's note] The German term *Waechter*, meaning custodian, overseer or guard, makes limited sense in this context. We have used 'guardian', assuming that the German translator mistranslated *guardian* as *guard*.

⁴ [Editor's note] Germ. *ein edler Teil*—a euphemism for bottom.

⁵ [Editor's note] Brolga or *Grus rubicunda*.