

Initiation Ceremony of the Birdhawal Tribe

R. H. Mathews

First published as 'Initiationszeremonie des Birdhawal-Stammes' in *Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft*, vol. 38 (1908), pp. 17-24. The article was written in English and translated into German by an unnamed translator. This version was retranslated into English by Christine Winter with reference to Mathews' original English draft in the National Library of Australia (NLA MS 8006/5/5).

The ceremony of initiation described in the following pages, known as the *Dyer-ra-yal*, was in operation among the Birdhawal tribe, whose hunting grounds were situated in the northeast corner of the state of Victoria. The boundaries of their territory, which overlapped the New South Wales border, are fully set out in my paper on the 'Birdhawal Language', now in the course of publication elsewhere.¹ In the present article I shall deal only with the most important portions of the ceremony, and my description of even these will be curtailed as much as possible, in order to keep the paper within moderate limits. It is hoped, however, that the details will be found sufficiently comprehensive for the purpose of comparison with similar rites in other parts of Australia.

The Dyerrayal has some interesting points of resemblance to the initiation ceremonies in vogue on the Macleay, Bellinger, Clarence and some other northern rivers of New South Wales. For example, the candidates for initiation are taken away from the main encampment in the evening, and the mothers and other women are permitted to witness their departure and even accompany them up to a certain stage.

In my description of the *Murrawin* ceremony² the men take charge of the novices in the evening, in sight of all the women. Next day the women are permitted to see the boys prior to their departure into the bush. At the *Walloonggurra* ceremony³ the novices are removed from the main camp about dusk, in full view of the women. The men again meet the women next morning before finally going away with the novices.

Another point of resemblance between the Dyerrayal, Murrawin, and Walloonggurra ceremonies is that bundles of small sticks or pieces of bark are thrown during the proceedings connected with the separation of the novices from their mothers. In some cases green twigs are cast over the heads of the women and boys; in other instances the women throw bundles of sticks at the

men, as in the Murrawin; in other cases the men throw small pieces of bark over the heads of the women, as in the Walloonggurra ceremony.

In contradistinction to the practices just related of taking charge of the novices in the evening and allowing the women to be spectators of their departure, there are many tribes in New South Wales and Victoria who take charge of the novices in the early morning and place coverings over the women to prevent their observing any part of the proceedings. For examples, see my 'Bunan Ceremony',⁴ 'Bora of the Kamilaroi',⁵ 'Burbung of the Wiradjuri',⁶ 'Wonggoa Ceremony',⁷ and others.

There are other tribes who, although the boys are removed from the camp in the morning, allow the women to witness the proceedings. Examples are given in my 'Wandarral Ceremony',⁸ 'Toara Ceremony of Queensland',⁹ 'Dolgarrity Ceremony of Victoria',¹⁰ 'Nguttan Ceremony',¹¹ and others.

In regard to the launching of missiles, such as small sticks, pieces of bark, or green leaves, over the heads of the men, women or boys, this is practised at some period during the course of nearly all the inaugural ceremonies, but in many of them the projectiles are thrown when the graduates are brought back to the main camp after having been away in the forests with the old men. In some cases the missiles consist of burning sticks or bark taken from the camp fire. Moreover, in a few of the initiation ceremonies the men fling small sticks at the marked trees while exhibiting them to the novitiates.¹²

The time occupied in connection with the initiation ceremony of the Birdhawal tribes was kept within the shortest possible limits. When the messengers were sent to gather the neighbouring tribes, the date of the arrival of the contingents at the main camp was so arranged that they would all turn up within a day or two of each other, if practicable. When all the participating mobs had arrived, the business of the meeting was promptly proceeded with; and when the novices were taken away from their mothers, the duration of their sojourn in the bush with the elders and the *Kuringal*¹³ was no longer than was absolutely required. The necessity for all reasonable expedition is obvious when we remember that the life of all Australian savages is one continual struggle for existence, and hence the extra demand on the game and vegetable products due to the 'invasion' of the visiting tribes is quite a serious and momentous matter.

It will not be out of place to mention here that the remarks in the last paragraph apply to the meetings for initiation purposes in all Australian tribes. In their native state, before they could rely upon getting supplies from the white people, it was unusual for the aborigines to remain in one camp more than a few days; their stay for a longer time depending upon the productiveness of the locality. As soon as the natural food supply was exhausted they were compelled to move to a fresh camping ground. With a large temporary increase in the

number of the people, incidental to these ceremonies, the difficulties of obtaining food were correspondingly increased. The various parts of the inaugural rites were consequently disposed of as speedily as practicable, in order to let the visiting tribes disperse and return to their hunting grounds.

We will now give a short account of the details of the ceremonies as carried out by the Birdhawal tribe and their allied groups.

The mustering of the people to attend the *Dyer-ra-yal* was accompanied by substantially the same routine as that in vogue among their neighbours. While the messengers were away gathering the different tribes, the men who remained at home selected a suitable place for the meeting and erected their camp there. Around this camp at a given point the new arrivals took up their quarters facing the direction from which they had come. As far as the nature of the ground permitted they occupied exactly the same relative position to each other in the camp as they did when at home in their respective hunting grounds. The locality selected for this general camp was an area of moderately level ground in the proximity of water where firewood was easily obtained. It was also chosen in a portion of the tribal hunting grounds where game and other food were sufficiently abundant to afford a supply of food for the people attending the ceremonies. On the arrival of a contingent of men and their families who had been invited, they approached the main camp and assembled on a clear space prepared for this purpose, and their headmen called out the names of remarkable mountains, waterholes, camping places and other characteristics of their country, pointing their weapons in that direction. Each contingent would have one or more novices to be initiated.

When all the visitors who were expected to join in the ceremony had arrived at the main camping ground, all the headmen present assembled at the *wurradhang* or private meeting place of the initiated men, and after consultation among themselves they determined the day for the commencement of the principal function of the meeting. The guardians or preceptors of the novices, and also the men who controlled the entire proceedings, were selected at this meeting, or, if there was an adjournment, at the next such meeting. These men were called collectively the *Ku-ring-al*, some of them being taken from each of the tribes present.

About the middle of the appointed day the novices brought by each contingent were gathered up at a convenient place within the confines of the camp and the body of each boy was painted in accordance with the custom of his people and his hair ornamented with feathers. This work was entrusted to the mothers and sisters of the boys, accompanied by several of the elder women. The young girls who were the possible wives of the youths also took part in the painting, and so did some of the men who were appointed guardians, to see that everything was carried out according to ancient custom. The guardian or sponsor

of a boy at these ceremonies was called *bul-lu-wrung*; he was one of the brothers, actual or titular, of the women from among whom the novice could, when old enough, obtain a wife in accordance with the tribal laws. An indispensable qualification for the duty of a guardian was that the man must have passed through the inaugural rites of his people.

The afternoon was far advanced before the decoration of the novices was completed. They were then placed sitting down in groups, the boys of each contingent sitting together, while their mothers and the elder women droned some chants similar to the *bobbarubwar* songs¹⁴ of the Kamilaroi women at the Bora ceremonies. Late in the afternoon the women and novices were directed to proceed to a location a short distance out of sight of the camp, accompanied by some of the guardians to show them where to go. This place, if not naturally clear, was prepared by removing the undergrowth and accumulations of small broken timber from its surface, which was then levelled and made smooth. The novices were placed sitting down in the same order as they had been sitting at the camp, with their heads bent forward. They were seated on green boughs or pieces of bark spread out on the ground for the purpose. The mother of each youth stuck her yamstick into the ground beside him, to the top of which a bunch of green twigs was tied. The novices were now called *dhūr-tu-ngurriñ*.

Presently the men constituting the *kuringal* were seen approaching in Indian file in a sort of jog, forming a winding line, having their bodies painted and grotesquely ornamented. Each man had a narrow piece of bark in one hand, with which he struck the ground at intervals of a few paces, uttering grunt-like exclamations. The women beat their folded rugs with their open hands, uttering in a low tone. The men came up in front of the boys, about half a dozen paces from them, and formed a curved line, the concave side of which was towards the boys and the women. They then crouched down and one of the outside men hit the ground in front of him with his piece of bark; each of the other men followed in succession, terminating at the other end of the line.¹⁵ This was repeated backward and forward along the row of men several times, after which all hands returned to their respective camps, the men going by a slightly different way to that taken by the women and novices. The novices belonging to each contingent went with their mothers to their own respective camps.

The following day the men went away some 300 to 400 metres from the main encampment and erected a bough yard,¹⁶ approximately in the shape of a horseshoe, being open at one end. The enclosure varied in size according to the number of novices and guardians to be accommodated. The convex end was generally towards that quarter of the compass from which the wind was blowing. Leaves of such trees that grew in the locality were thickly strewn on the floor, which had previously been made level. Having finished their work the men all returned to the main camp.

In the afternoon of that day, about an hour before sunset, the women, novices and guardians repaired to the place where the beating of the ground with bark took place the day before, whither the men of the *kuringal* detachment shortly afterwards followed them and went through a similar performance. At its conclusion the men withdrew, leaving the women and their companions there. In a little while the men reappeared, walking leisurely in a sinuous line, the headman in the lead. Every man carried in his hands a few small green twigs, from which the leaves had been stripped, known as *deddeluñ*. These twigs had been broken or cut from the extremities of growing bushes, and were about 45 cm long, varying in thickness from that of a goose quill to that of a lead pencil. As the men appeared the novices were raised to their feet and placed standing in a line, with their faces toward the land of their nativity. The women stood in two or three parallel rows a few yards from them.

When the men came up close they formed a circle around the novices and commenced throwing the *deddeluñ* over their heads. Some of the men brought an extra supply of twigs which they handed to the mothers, sisters-in-law, and sisters of the novices. The women then took part in casting twigs into the air above the boys' heads. This performance lasted but a few minutes until all the twigs had been thrown, after which the young women gathered them up off the ground. Each novice was then held up on the shoulders of the men who had charge of him, and while in that position he raised his arms and gave a heaving or vibratory motion to his chest by spasmodically drawing his breath in and liberating it again, swaying his body at the same time. Each boy was elevated in succession and handfuls of leaves were cast at him by all the people present, amidst congratulatory shouts. The whole party, male and female, then started away to the semicircular enclosure described above, the men carrying the novices being in the centre, and the women in the rear carrying the *deddeluñ* which had been gathered off the ground.

On arrival at the bough yard, the *dhurtungurriñ* were placed lying down, face upward, on the leafy bed which had been prepared for them and were covered over with bushy twigs and leaves.¹⁷ One or more fires were lit not far from their feet to keep them warm. The boys were told that they must not turn over, nor in any way change the position in which they had been laid. They were forbidden to scratch their heads or any other part of their bodies. If they wanted to attend to any necessities of nature, they must do it where they were lying.¹⁸ They were not allowed to speak; if a boy wanted anything he must make a sign to the guardian who had charge of him.¹⁹ The same women who had been connected with the ceremonies from the first took up their position at the outside or convex end of the bough fence and made fires there at which they sat down to rest themselves.

After a short time the elder women, accompanied by the others, got up and commenced walking round the enclosure, the men joining in the procession at the rear. The women carried in each hand a few of the twigs which had been cast over the novices, as already stated, which they beat together as a sort of accompaniment to a monotonous chant, which was supposed to act as a lullaby in putting the novices to sleep. The meaning of the song was unintelligible even to the singers themselves. This marching round and round the enclosure, and the beating together of the *deddeluñ*, was kept up all night. Soon after daylight next morning the humming sound of *Turndun*, the name of a bullroarer, was heard in the near distance, upon which the women were directed to lay down the twigs in a heap on the ground alongside the bough fence, and to depart to the main encampment. All the women and children then went away to a fresh camping place, the location of which had been decided by the old men.

When the women were out of sight, the head men and magicians proceeded to remove the leafy covering from the novices and wake them up. They were all placed in a sitting posture, but still remained silent. Each boy was now dressed in the full regalia of a man of his tribe, comprising a brow-band, waist-girdle, apron and other articles. A rug or other covering was then cast over each novice's head in such a way that he could not see anything that was going on around him. All this having been satisfactorily completed, the *bulluwrun* or guardian who had been assigned to each novice assumed charge of him. A firebrand was now applied to the bough yard and the whole structure. The leafy bed and the *deddelun* were completely consumed. The whole party then started away to another camp several miles distant, where the boys were placed sitting on leaves spread on the ground, cross-legged, with their heads bowed upon their breasts. Their guardians remained constantly with them and the novices were not allowed to converse either among themselves or with their guardians. If a boy wanted anything he made a sign to his guardian, who then asked him what it was and the novice told him in a whisper.

The men of the *kuringal* went out hunting and returned a short time before sunset, each bringing game and other food obtained. This was cooked, and a limited allowance of the best parts given to the novices. A few days might be spent at this camp, or a fresh camping place might be reached every night, depending upon the food supply.²⁰ If the party shifted to a different camp every night, the novices were taken out hunting with the men during the day. They marched along with the covering on their heads, in the custody of the *bulluwrun*, and on arriving at the locality which had been agreed upon as the camping ground for the night, a windbreak of boughs was made for the novitiates if the night were cold, some of the guardians remaining constantly with them.

At these camping places in the bush, different burlesques were performed every night by the light of the camp fires, such as pretending to dig a wombat²¹

out of its burrow, frightening opossums out of a tree,²² and the like, for the instruction and amusement of the neophytes. As the representations were similar in character to others described by me in the initiation ceremonies of many other Australian tribes, it is not considered necessary to give further details here.²³

In the afternoon of the last day of their stay in the bush, the boys were sat down, with the covering still upon their heads. A number of the *kuringal*, who had painted their bodies with powdered charcoal and grease, with grotesque decorations on their bodies and in their hair, now assembled on a clear space, in a curved line, some 20 yards in front of where the novices were, and commenced swinging the bullroarer *Turndun*. The guardians helped the boys to their feet and, removing the covering from their heads, directed them to pay special attention. An old man then approached each novice and rubbed the instrument on his breast and some other portions of his body and invited him to take particular notice of it. Each boy was cautioned by a man belonging to a tribe other than his own that if ever he betrayed anything he had seen or been taught in the bush, he would be killed. From this time onward, the novices' heads were left uncovered and they were free to look around them and converse if first spoken to by their seniors.

The day being now far advanced, all hands proceeded to the women's camp, which might be a mile or two distant or perhaps farther, where they were all passed through the customary smoke ordeal. A short time after dark, some of the men and novices went into the bush adjacent to the *burrikin* or camp of the women and swung the longer and smaller bullroarer. After that everybody retired for the night, the neophytes being conducted to a place prepared for them close to the men's quarters. During the next day all the visiting tribes departed on their homeward journey, each tribe taking with them the graduates belonging to a neighbouring tribe, this matter being arranged by the old men. During this term of probation the scarring of the youths' bodies was carried out and they were further instructed in the songs, dances and folklore of the people.

It was incumbent upon each neophyte to participate in one or more additional inaugural gatherings before he was fully qualified to take his place as a man of the tribe. The reason for this is evident when we remember that at the first Dyerrayal a novice attended, he was prevented from seeing the whole of the ceremony in consequence of being covered over and having to keep his eyes down cast during some of the most important parts of it. In some cases a boy was not more than 12 or 14 years of age when he was first initiated, which was further grounds for delay in admitting him to the full status of manhood.

During the case of instruction that commenced from the time the novices were separated from their mothers until they were finally recognised as men, they were taught what kinds of food they might catch and eat, as well as what foods were taboo to them. The food rules governing the eating of flesh were

explained by the old men, but there were certain occasions when the boys were conducted to a place where the women were assembled. The mothers and female relatives of the graduates gave them vegetable food, which conferred upon them the freedom to eat a particular vegetable from that time onward. On another day the boys were brought up and the women gave them water in a native vessel, after which they could drink water from any stream in the tribal territory. Compare this with my description of the *Keeparra* ceremony²⁴ and the 'Burbung of the New England Tribes',²⁵ where the women gave the neophytes a drink of water out of a *koolamin*.²⁶

It should be stated that the bullroarer that was sounded on the morning the boys were taken possession of by the *kuringal*, was not the same instrument that was exhibited to the novitiates in the bush; the latter being somewhat larger and giving a louder sound. There was also a much smaller bullroarer used at the conclusion of the assemblage, in conjunction with the larger one, within hearing of the women and children. Compare with my 'Mũlyerra-Initiationszeremonie'.²⁷

In 1896 I described the *Bunan* Ceremony of the Thoorga and other tribes.²⁸ In 1885 A. W. Howitt had given a short report about the initiation ceremonies of the Kurnai tribe, whose border lies to the west of the Birdhawal.²⁹ In 1896 I published an improved report about the Kurnai ceremonies, accompanied by a map of the different camps and other localities.³⁰ The present article completes the details of all initiation rites exercised by the coastal tribes beginning in Sydney, New South Wales, to Port Phillip in Victoria; and it is of special satisfaction to me to see this work published by the Anthropological Society in Vienna. The remarks and suggestions of your members will be enormously important to me.

The foregoing description of the Dyerrayal ceremony is compiled from notes, which I myself have written down in the course of some personal meetings with survivors of the Birdhawal tribe at their places of residence. I have published a grammar and vocabulary of the Birdhawal language³¹ elsewhere, as well as a grammar and vocabulary of the Kurnai dialect,³² to which I refer the reader.

ENDNOTES

¹ See RHM 1907, 'Language of the Birdhawal Tribe in Gippsland, Victoria', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 46, pp. 346-59.

² RHM 1900-01, 'The Murrawin Ceremony', *Queensland Geographical Journal*, vol. 16, p. 37.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 67-8.

⁴ RHM 1896, 'The Bũnã Ceremony of New South Wales', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 9, p. 336.

⁵ RHM 1896, 'The Bora of the Kamilaroi Tribes', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, vol. 9 (new series), p. 154.

⁶ RHM 1896, 'The Bũrbũng of the Wiradthuri Tribes', *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, vol. 25, p. 308.

⁷ RHM 1904, 'Ethnological Notes on the Aboriginal Tribes of New South Wales and Victoria', *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales*, vol. 38, p. 310.

- ⁸ RHM 1897, 'The Wandarral of the Richmond and Clarence River Tribes', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, vol. 10 (new series), p. 33.
- ⁹ RHM 1900, 'The Toara Ceremony of the Dippil Tribes of Queensland', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 2 (new series), p. 142.
- ¹⁰ RHM, 'Ethnological Notes on the Aboriginal Tribes of New South Wales and Victoria', p. 330.
- ¹¹ RHM 1898, 'Initiation Ceremonies of Australian Tribes', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 37, p. 69.
- ¹² RHM 1897, 'The Keeparra Ceremony of Initiation', *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, vol. 26, p. 330.
- ¹³ [Editor's note] In 1896 Mathews defined *Koorringal* as 'the chosen band of athletes, who have the custody of the guardians and novices whilst the latter are going through the secret ceremonies in the bush'. See RHM 1896, 'The Bora of the Kamilaroi Tribes', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, vol. 9 (new series), p. 151. This is consistent with the explanation given later in the text.
- ¹⁴ RHM, 'The Bora of the Kamilaroi Tribes', p. 153.
- ¹⁵ RHM, 'The Būnān Ceremony of New South Wales', p. 338.
- ¹⁶ RHM, 'Ethnological Notes on the Aboriginal Tribes of New South Wales and Victoria', p. 313.
- ¹⁷ RHM, 'The Murrarwin Ceremony', *Queensland Geographical Journal*, vol. 16, 1900, p. 37.
- ¹⁸ RHM 1899-1900, 'The Walloongurra Ceremony', *Proceedings and Transactions of the Queensland Branch of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia*, vol. 15, p. 68.
- ¹⁹ RHM, 'The Keeparra Ceremony of Initiation', pp. 330-1.
- ²⁰ Every time the men moved their camp from one place to another, the women and children also shifted their quarters, but kept several miles away from the men. Messengers were in daily communication between the *kuringal* camp and that of the women, in order that the men might know exactly where the women and children were located. A few men remained constantly with the women to check that the instructions of the *kuringal* in regard to their movements were carried out.
- ²¹ A marsupial, *phascolomys*, which lives in burrows similar to that of rabbits. Note—German translator.
- ²² RHM, 'Ethnological Notes on the Aboriginal Tribes of New South Wales and Victoria', p. 319.
- ²³ See for example *Mitteilungen*, vol. 34, p. 81. Note—German translator.
- ²⁴ RHM, 'The Keeparra Ceremony of Initiation', pp. 336-9.
- ²⁵ RHM 1896, 'The Burbung of the New England tribes, New South Wales', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, vol. 9 (new series), pp. 133-4.
- ²⁶ *Koolamin* is the name used by the natives of Port Jackson (New South Wales) for a small trough made of bark or wood. The word has, like many native terms, entered into Australian English.
- ²⁷ RHM 1904, 'Die Mūlyerra-Initiationszeremonie', *Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft*, vol. 34, p. 82. Reproduced this volume.
- ²⁸ RHM, 'The Būnān Ceremony of New South Wales', pp. 327-44, with plate.
- ²⁹ Howitt, A. W. 1885, 'The Jeraeil, or Initiation Ceremonies of the Kurnai Tribe', *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, vol. 14, pp. 301-25.
- ³⁰ RHM, 'The Būrbūng of the Wiradthuri Tribes', pp. 317-18, with plate.
- ³¹ RHM 1907, 'Language of the Birdhawal Tribe in Gippsland, Victoria', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 46.
- ³² RHM 1902, 'The Aboriginal Languages of Victoria', *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales*, vol. 36, pp. 92-106.