

NOTES ON AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL STONE WEAPONS AND IMPLEMENTS.

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(PLATES IX. and x., figs. 1-5.)

i.—*The Knife used by the Mulligan River (North Central Queensland) Aborigines in the "Mika Operation."*

I am indebted to the kindness of Mr. H. S. W. Crummer, of the Department of Lands, for an opportunity of describing the stone implement, or knife, used by the blacks of the Mulligan River in performing the curious rite known as the "Mika," or, as it is sometimes written "Mikæ" operation. Notwithstanding that more than one reliable account has been published of it, there still seems to be much scepticism and ignorance on the subject. I have, therefore, endeavoured to bring together a brief account of all that has been written on the subject before furnishing a description of the knife itself. The latter is the more necessary, for quite recently Mr. Carl Lumholtz has figured a similar knife from Georgina River, which differs to some extent from Crummer's example.

One of the first, if not absolutely the first, to notice the peculiar custom or rite, known under the above name, appears to have been the late Governor E. J. Eyre in 1840-41, during his exploration of the country around the Great Australian Bight,* he at that time being Resident Magistrate of the Murray River District.

* "Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia," &c., 1840-41, 2 vols., London, 1845.

Eyre noticed the rite amongst the Aborigines of the Bight and the Port Lincoln Districts, and describes it as "finditus usque ad urethram a parte infera penis." * It was performed on lads from twelve to fourteen, who were also circumcised.

From the statements of Mr. W. H. R. Jessop, Albert A. C. Le Souëf, and Dr. Milne Robertson, it would appear that more than one form of this rite occurs. The first of these authors says: "Thus circumcision prevails among all tribes, but varies both in the manner and the time of its operation. As well as I could ascertain there appear to be four distinct methods of performing this ceremony—Circumcision proper, Division, Perforation, and Depilation. The first is the most common, and is found nearly everywhere; the third and fourth are practised chiefly on the Murray, whilst the second occurs but seldom." †

Now, although these remarks are ostensibly meant to refer only to circumcision, I cannot help thinking that the subjects of "Division" or "Perforation" have some bearing on the matter now under consideration. Indeed this would to some extent appear to be borne out by the observations of Mr. Le Souëf, who says that amongst the Gawler Range blacks in South Australia an incision is made at the base of the scrotum. ‡ The account given by Dr. Milne Robertson, § being the results of personal observation of aboriginal prisoners at Rottnest Island, Western Australia, is most valuable, and coincides with that given by Dr. Cox. In the case of the De Grey River blacks, the urethra is opened from the meatus urinarius to the middle of the penis ;

* Vol. I., p. 212 ; Vol. II., p. 332.

† "Flindersland and Sturtland ; or the Inside and Outside of Australia" (2 vols. 8vo, London, 1862), Vol. ii. p. 205. I quite fail to see what connection can exist between Depilation and Circumcision. The former was much practised by certain of the South Australian tribes, and consists of the plucking of every hair from the front of the body. (See Sadlier, *Aborigines of Australia*, 1883, p. 11.)

‡ Smyth's "Aborigines of Victoria," 1878, Vol. ii. p. 296.

§ "Report upon certain peculiar Habits and Customs of the Aborigines of Western Australia," &c., p. 8 (8vo, Perth, W.A., 1879).

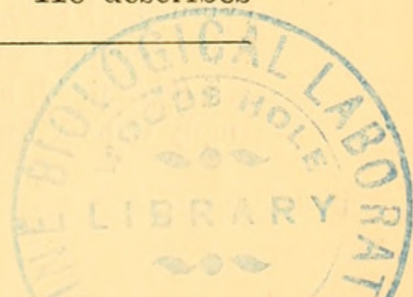
whilst the natives inhabiting the north side of the Murchison River make the incision from the meatus to the scrotum, the sides of the wound being kept apart by rubbing stones up and down it. The instrument used is said to be a sharp stone, which is preserved afterwards with much secrecy. Dr. Robertson considers the origin of the operation to be obscure, and not from a desire to restrict population. He states that as performed by the De Grey blacks it is a mild form of malformation known as Hypospadias. A large amount of interesting information is given about this rite and its results by this author, which need not be repeated here, but he distinctly states that it does not in his estimation prevent fecundity.

Dr. J. C. Cox has recorded* the observations of two gentlemen who had lived amongst the blacks who practise the "Mika" operation, Messrs. Sydney Brown, and H. Bloomfield. Dr. Cox describes the rite as a slitting of the urethra "from the posterior part of the meatus at the point of the glans, along the median line of the under surface of the penis as far back as the scrotum." Mr. S. Brown informed Dr. Cox that the "Mika" operation was performed by the tribes to the northwest of Fort Bourke; whilst Mr. Bloomfield ascertained the existence of the custom about Fort Constantine Station on the Cloncurry River, 270 miles south of Normanton; about the head waters of the Cloncurry River; in the Mackinlay Ranges; and amongst some other tribes mentioned by Dr. Cox.

An equally clear account of this singular ceremony is given by Dr. J. M. Creed † who calls it the "most perfect form of "Malthusianism practicable." According to this writer the "Mika" operation is practised throughout the whole of the interior of the continent "from the eastern boundary of the watershed of the Georgina River on the east, to nearly the settled districts of Western Australia on the west, and from the coast range on the north to Cooper's Creek Watershed on the south." He describes

* Proc. Linn. Soc. N.S. Wales, 1881, V.. Pt. 4, p. 633.

† Australian Medical Gazette, Vol. II., 1883, p. 95.



the opening as just anterior to the scrotum and from one to one and a-half inches long, or the whole of the posterior wall of the urethra is removed. It is performed both at about the age of puberty, or at a more advanced period of life.

We now know that this slitting of the urethra is practised by the West Kimberley Aborigines, for Mr. W. W. Froggatt* noticed it during his recent collecting tour there. He says that the lads are first circumcised about the age of nine or ten, then "about five years later, the young men undergo a much more severe rite, namely the slitting of the urethra, which is conducted with further mysteries."

Next to that of Dr. Robertson, probably the most complete account of the "Mika" operation emanated from the pen of the late M. Miklouho-Maclay, and it is much to be regretted that a copy of his paper† does not exist in Sydney; at any rate, I have been unable to find one.

Lastly, Lumholtz has figured‡ the "Mika"-knife used by the natives of the Georgina River. He states that it does not arise from a desire to limit population in consequence of a scarcity of food, but from an objection on the part of parents to being troubled with too many children, although he rather contradicts this view by stating that in some tribes the children are operated on. Lumholtz has ascertained that the rite is practised by the tribes west of the Diamantina River, and west and north of the Gulf of Carpentaria.§

Unlike the method described by Dr. Cox, the Georgina River blacks are said by Lumholtz to cut an aperture only an inch long at the base of the penis, the edges of the wound being burnt with

* Proc. Linn. Soc. N. S. Wales, 1888, III., Pt. 2, p. 652.

† "Ueber die Mika-Operation in Central Australien." Zeitsch. für Ethnol. (Verhandl.) 1880, XII., p. 85.

‡ "Among Cannibals," &c., 1890, p. 48.

§ *Ibid.* p. 47, note. I presume north of the Gulf of Carpentaria would imply Cape York.

hot stones, presumedly to cauterise it, and then kept apart by small sticks, resulting in the formation of a permanent opening through which the spermatic fluid is emitted. Mr. A. J. Vogan, of the 'Illustrated London News' staff, who has just returned from the Mulligan River, informs me that the blacks around Sandringham Station, the locality at which Mr. Crummer's Mika knife was obtained, slit up the entire length of the urethra, after the manner described by Dr. Cox, and that he had personally examined two such cases.

The Mulligan River knife consists of a highly altered schist, now in the condition of a jasperoid rock, and at the after end is encased in a more or less rounded mass of resin, which serves as a handle, the wooden termination represented in Lumholtz's figure being absent here. The entire length of the weapon is seven and a half inches, that of the blade four and a half. It is three-edged, one face practically flat and unworked, the other angular and divided by a rather excentric ridge. The smaller of the two faces thus produced is again separated into two parts by a somewhat oblique subsidiary ridge passing to the cutting edge. There are no traces of any secondary working. The cutting edge is somewhat irregular in outline, but excellently well kept in the one plane, terminating forwards in a slightly jagged point, and very sharp. The surface is perfectly smooth. The blade at its insertion in the resin is all but two inches in width. The section is widely triangular, with the apex of the triangle somewhat excentric.

The figure given by Lumholtz is the only one of the Mika-knife with which I am acquainted. Like that from Sandringham, it is a three-sided weapon, with two of the cutting edges very sharp. Instead of a simple handle of resin, the latter is, in this case, used as the medium of uniting the knife to its wooden handle, which is described as painted with chalk figures, whilst the intermediate resinous portion is ornamented with reddish-brown ochre. The knife was encased in a sheath made of two pieces of tea-tree bark, placed together, and kept in apposition by a binding string spun

from opossum hair. The surface of the sheath is whitened with chalk, and terminates at the smaller end in a tuft of red cockatoo down.*

Mr. Lumholtz adds that the knives are procured by making a fire on suitable rock, and then pouring water on it, resulting in the flaking off of the desired piece. But Mr. Vogan tells me that the Mulligan River blacks throw heated stones directly into water, causing their fracture, and from the fragments of which likely pieces are selected. Two such fragments, brought by Mr. Vogan, are exhibited, consisting of a white chalcedonic quartz. One is simply a flake with a decided conchoidal fracture, and which could well be made use of in Aboriginal daily life; whilst the other partakes more of the nature of a core fragment. Its general shape is rather that of the Mika-knife, but what would be the angular face is deeply furrowed. At the upper end, one edge still bears traces of fire action,

The extreme in the existence of this rite appears to be reached by the blacks inhabiting the west coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria, and for one hundred miles inland between the Roper and Nicholson Rivers, who slit the urethra, according to Inspector P. Foelsche† of the Northern Territory Police, "from its opening right down to the root." The rite is performed at eighteen years of age, but is preceded by circumcision at fourteen. Among these men a sharp shell is used as well as a stone knife.

The object of the Mika-operation appears to be unknown at present, the blacks being either unable or unwilling to divulge it. By most writers and observers its adoption is supposed to be a means of limiting population, a kind of Malthusianism. This seems to be the view of Dr. Creed, as he says it renders the men "for the future sterile, but not impotent." Dr. Milne Robertson, on the other hand, advances reasons to prove that the former is not absolutely certain. My friend, Mr. J. Frazer, LL.D.,

* "Among Cannibals," &c., 1890, p. 48.

† Trans. R. Soc. S. Australia, 1881-82 [1882] V. p. 17, *note*.

believes the custom to be the remnant of a forgotten religious ceremony, and herein I think he is correct.

Whilst on this subject it will not be uninteresting to notice how the general pattern of the Mika-knife and its handle, as illustrated in Lumholtz's figure, has been preserved by certain north-eastern tribes in the knives now made by them from old scrap iron, broken larger knives, shear-blades, and such like. Thanks to Mr. George Sweet, of Brunswick, Melbourne, I am able to exhibit three such from near Cooktown. The first and shortest of these has the handle formed by wrapping the blade round with a piece of turkey-red cotton, kept in its place by loosely winding string and thread round it; it is six and a half inches long. The second knife, although shorter in the exposed blade, is longer in its entirety, being seven and a half inches, but not so broad as the first knife. Here the handle is formed by wrapping round some fabric, and then apparently encasing in a native gum, which has set hard, whilst on this string has been wound very regularly, probably when the gum was warm, producing a compact and solid handle.

The third and last knife is the most interesting of the three, and is likewise the longest, being eight inches. The fabric used in this instance has been again daubed and partially covered with some gummy substance, which has set hard, as in the second instance, just described. But protruding from the base is a mass of green sheep's wool, and it is this which brings Lumholtz's illustration so forcibly before us. It will be remembered that the sheath of his Mika-knife was ornamented at the apex by a tuft of cockatoo's feathers.

Addendum.—(June 12, 1890.)—I omitted to mention that Police Trooper S. Gason states that this rite is known in the Dieyerie Tribe, around Cooper's Creek, about 630 miles north of Adelaide, as the "Koolpie." It is performed on youths as soon as the beard is sufficiently grown to admit of the ends being tied. The man to be operated on is rendered helpless, and the penis

laid on a piece of bark. An incision is then made with a sharp stone from the "foreskin to the base." A piece of bark is then placed over the wound and tied so as to prevent closure. [The Dieyerie Tribe of Australian Aborigines, &c., p. 21 (8vo, Adelaide, 1874).]

EXPLANATION OF PLATE.

Figs. 1-3.—Three views of Mika-knife from the Mulligan River; Mining and Geol. Mus.; Nat. size.

Fig. 1, front view;

Fig. 2, edge view;

Fig. 3, section.

Fig. 4.—Knife generally resembling the above made by existing natives around Cooktown. Coll. Sweet, Melbourne. Somewhat reduced.

Fig. 5.—Edge view of same.



Etheridge, Robert and Melo-Costa, Wanessa de. 1890. "Notes on Australian aboriginal stone weapons and implements." *Proceedings of the Linnean Society of New South Wales* 5, 251–258. <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.part.18634>.

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