

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 1885.

IN THE PRESENCE OF HIS EXCELLENCY SIR ANTHONY MUSGRAVE, K.C.M.G. THE HON. W. PETTIGREW, M.L.C., IN THE CHAIR.

NEW MEMBERS.

Lieutenant H. C. Pritchard; Mr. A. Banks; and Mr. Rainsford Hannay.

DONATIONS.

"Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society," December, 1884, No. 14. Singapore, 1885. "Notes and Queries," No. 1. Singapore, 1885. From the Royal Asiatic Society, Singapore, 1885.

"The Victorian Naturalist," Vol. II., No. 6. Melbourne, October, 1885. From the Field Naturalists' Club of Victoria.

"Dun Echt Observatory Publications," Vol. III. *Mauritius Expedition*, 1874. *Division II*. Aberdeen, 1885. From the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres.

"Verhandlungen des Vereins für Naturwissenschaftliche Unterhaltung," 1878-1882, Band V. Hamburg, 1883. From the Society.

The following papers were read:—

CONCERNING SOME SUPERSTITIONS OF
NORTH QUEENSLAND ABORIGINES.

BY

E. PALMER, Esq., M.L.A.

AMONGST students of the subject it is now generally conceded, even by the few who do not recognise the universality of this belief, that it is very doubtful whether any so-called savage

tribes are altogether destitute of the conception of a future state. Some people, however, in spite of the conclusions of specialists, deny that the Australian blacks have any such belief, and in support of their conclusions point to the silence in this matter of the early explorers, in the published records of their investigations; or produce evidence, from the many narratives in which such a belief is alleged, of ideas having being attributed to the blacks undoubtedly derived from the system in which the narrators have been themselves disciplined. I fully recognised the force of the latter objection, and accordingly in gathering the information now related was careful to eliminate the possibility of such an event. With regard, however, to the silence of the explorers, I would insist that their opportunities, in passing from one tribe to another, being never long familiar with any one spoken language, were not such as to enable them to arrive at any conclusion on the subject,* and especially so when it is borne in mind that ideas relating to its superstitions are such as the savage mind finds it difficult to give expression to, even when the natural reserve, especially with strangers, in these matters has been overcome.

The remarks in this paper have for the most part reference to the beliefs of the blacks of the *Mycoolon* † tribe, a tribe which occupies a territory eighty or ninety miles in length, and nearly the same in width, situated about one hundred and twenty miles to the south of Normanton—a post and telegraph town in the Gulf of Carpentaria—and embraces both the Flinders and Saxby Rivers within its hunting grounds.

These items of information were taken down in writing from natives at first hand, and their genuineness was verified in many instances by the separate examination of different black “boys.”

* cf., G. Bennett's “Wanderings,” London, 1834, vol. I, p. 13.

†The prefix *My-*, which is also common to the designation of other tribes adjoining that of the *Mycoolon*, is said to signify short words or short language.

No information was accepted where any traces of white man's ideas were detected. In fact the "boys," though employed on the station as stock-riders, were almost uncontaminated by civilised ideas, and they knew nothing of what blacks call "devil, devil" or "jump up whitefellow," nor did they entertain any foreign religious ideas whatever except their own native traditions.

These "boys" acted as the medium of communication between the writer and an old man belonging to their tribe named *Plungren*. Amongst these Mycoolon blacks, as in every tribe in Australia perhaps, there are certain old men who are the repositories of the numerous traditions and superstitions, and who alone can perform with efficacy the various ceremonies attendant on the healing of the sick. These doctors also instruct the young men in the beliefs of the tribe and generally initiate them as to the proper conduct of their lives, and this they do at special meetings—known elsewhere as Bora meetings—held for the purpose. It is their special privilege to hold communication with the spirits of the departed from amongst them, by which means they become possessed with much and varied knowledge, and this they impart on occasion to the tribe. *Plungren* was one of these doctor-men, was of about sixty years of age, and was the father of several sons all young and in the service of the station as riders. He was a tall man, of a very active temperament, and of lively intelligence, well versed in all matters relating to tribal traditions. He was quite unable to converse in English.*

* As an illustration of the character of this remarkable man I may add, that he was much respected by all the people of his tribe on account of his ancient prowess and deeds of pluck. He was particularly renowned for his endurance in the chase and for fleetness of foot, and obtained the name of *Plungren* in consequence. It is said of him that being at one time in the country of other blacks—the *Mygoodathy*—he was chased by the whole tribe for upwards of fifty miles, and that although he had many narrow escapes he ultimately outstripped his pursuers and returned in safety to his own people. Finding, too, that his little toes were a nuisance

THEIR ORIGIN.

They seem to have no theory relating to their whence nor concerning their arrival in the country. They are impressed with the belief that there were blacks in the land before them, and speak of them with vagueness and wonderment. Not only their present and future but their past also is in some way related to the stars in the heavens—which connection is the subject of their legends.

PRODUCTION OF RAIN, &c.

They have firm faith in the power of producing rain being possessed by many of their number. The means adopted, by those who have this faculty, are as curious as various. Some of the Gulf tribes skin a native cat (*Dasyurus*), and hang it in a tree; or break up mussel shells, with the fish in them, and return the material to the water; others gather up dust, throw it into the air, and then blow upon it with their breath; whilst others, again, steep the entrails of opossums in water, accompanying the operation by the performance of certain ceremonies.

KNOCKING OUT THE FRONT TEETH.

The blacks knock out their two front teeth, for they believe that when after death they enter into the future state—*Yalairy*—they will be thereby qualified to drink of the good clean water; and, unless they have undergone this operation whilst on earth, they will only partake there of thick and muddy water.

CRYSTAL.

Particular crystals, called *Roré*, play an important part in many of their ceremonies, and are regarded with feelings of superstitious reverence, as in some way connected with their future existence. These crystals are retained by the principal of the old or medicine men of the tribes, who produce them when occasion requires, but at other times carefully conceal them. The

and impediment to him, catching in the grass, as he expressed himself, he deliberately removed them, and accordingly has now but four toes on either foot.

source, too, of these crystals they profess to be a mysterious one. They are either obtained from the inside of blacks, being sucked or drawn out from them by the medicine men, or are found with some ceremony in the mountain districts, as the result of special expeditions, occupying some months, during which much privation and hardship is endured. These crystals play an important part in connection with the ceremonies attending the coming of age of their young men, when the latter are initiated into the mysteries of the tribe, but they are also used for other purposes, such as for buying a "gin" from her uncle or father.

WITCHCRAFT.

The black lives in continual dread of mysterious death, which he attributes not so much to some spirit agency as to the machinations of his foe or foes. In fact he scarcely regards death, unless due to accident, or even sickness, otherwise than as the work of some enemy who may be separated some distance from him, and he believes, too, that in his turn he can in like manner work destruction. This belief is almost universal amongst the Australian blacks. The Mycoolon tribe entertain many peculiar ideas as to the way in which these evil influences may be exercised. The blacks of this tribe can, as they think, command the thunder and lightning, the wind and the storm, to aid the accomplishment of their evil purposes, but have also special methods.

BEECHARRAH.

By this designation a death is implied, which is attributed to the following series of events : The victim is killed by an invisible spear. Some enemy of his (having prepared a spear by cutting it nearly through, by a circular incision with a mussel, a few inches from the end) steals stealthily upon him, as he is engaged in the chase, creeping from tree to tree, and while still unperceived, hurls it at him. The spear strikes him, but he is unconscious of the fact ; it penetrates his body, but without rent or

blood; the end of the spear being broken off sticks firm in his flesh, but he feels it not. He continues his hunting quite ignorant of what has happened, and returns to his camp as evening comes on, knowing nothing of the evil which is impending. As night approaches he is sick, symptoms become more urgent, he is light-headed, plays, laughs, and makes a great noise, then he grows delirious, and soon succumbs entirely under the influence of the Beecharrah.

THIMMOOL.

This name denotes another very common superstition amongst the blacks. In this case the mysterious weapon is a pointed fragment, six or seven inches long, said to be derived from a human leg bone, and it is believed that both sickness and death are caused by this bone when held over anyone whilst asleep, the weapon being at the same time pointed at but not allowed to touch his body. Death supervenes as the effect of this occult cause, as in the above instance. The blacks live in great dread of the *Thimmool* being pointed at them.

MARRO.

The name of another method of working evil which is especially adapted for dealing with a black when at a distance. The instrument, *Marro*, employed in this case is derived from the pinion of a bird, and consists of two small pieces of bone fastened together by wax, in which is placed some hair of the person whose injury is intended. The method of procedure with this charm, is to place it on or stick it in the ground, surround it by fire, and afterwards set it in the sun, and again return it to the fire. Varying the ceremony according as the intention is to kill or only cause sickness to their enemy, and when they think their victim is sufficiently sick, or they are otherwise satisfied, they suspend the effect of the charm by placing the *Marro* in water.

WINGO.

With regard to this superstition it is stated that the object to

be accomplished is that of secretly removing the kidney fat from a black fellow, for subsequent employment in catching fish, great luck befalling the fisherman by reason of its use. The invariable consequence of this however is the death of the victim of the operation. A black is described as preparing a rope from fibre or bark and then, having watched for an opportunity whilst his enemy is asleep, partially choking his victim by winding this rope about his neck. The sleeper is not aroused and his enemy proceeds to open his side under the "short rib" and, having removed the kidney fat, fastens up the inside by a cord, quickly replaces the skin, whereupon the opening immediately heals over. No blood is lost during the operation, of which too no signs subsequently remain. The man awakes and, unconscious of what he has undergone, pursues his daily life as if nothing amiss had befallen him. In progress of time however he has some misgivings and imagines he has been the victim of *Wingo*. He is hunting and has ascended some tree in quest of an opossum, and in jumping down to catch it as it would escape, he makes an unusual effort, he feels something give way, the cord by which his enemy has fastened him internally has snapped asunder, he is aware of the hopelessness of his condition, returns to the camp, and fully alive now to every thing which has been done, resigns himself to his fate and passes away.*

A feature in the habits of these aborigines, which is certainly worthy of note, is the care which the sick, aged, or infirm receive at their hands. These they occasionally carry from camp to camp, reserve the best of food for their share, and suffer no one to make a jest at their expense, in allusion to their sufferings. And when, in spite of this attention, death ensues, they

* This superstition, with certain modifications, is very prevalent amongst the different tribes of the continent. In some tribes the victim is stunned by a blow of a stick and his kidney fat abstracted, a bunch of grass inserted, and he is left to linger till death.

never fail to mourn for the victims; the mourners smearing their faces with white clay, and cutting their heads. In addition to this too, abstinence, with respect to certain food, is practised for some time afterwards, and even when months have passed by, the death song * is nightly chanted.

SPIRITS.

The blacks believe that their existence on earth does not terminate with the death of their bodies, and that the spirits both of the men and women still survive. In this spiritual state they are known as *Limbeen-jar-golong*, the word *Limbeen* denoting the bark of a tree, a name with, perhaps, some metaphorical allusion to the fact that during the day the spirits remain where the bodies which once contained them were deposited, and only show themselves at night—coming as it were from behind the bark of a tree. The old man Plungren was very familiar with these spirits, and had arrived at a somewhat remarkable estimate of their personal appearance. They were all bone as it were—mere skeletons—and yet they possessed long ears, erect like

* With reference to this particular class of musical expression, the following interesting observations were communicated by Mr. P. R. Gordon to the *Brisbane Courier*, whilst this paper was being revised for publication:—"In the ordinary corroboree the song or chant is carried on throughout in a major key, whereas the death wail, or song, is always chanted in a minor key. So that the minor key would appear to suggest itself to savages, as well as to highly cultured musicians, as the most appropriate for giving expression to feelings of sorrow. So far as I can remember, Handel's "Dead March in Saul"—which is in the natural key of C major—is the only notable exception of doleful music being written in a major key. About thirty years ago a Murray chief died, and, in the middle of the night, a large camp of blacks, near the hut in which I was sleeping, set up a death wail, the theme or refrain of which was so frequently repeated, that I was enabled to roughly write down the music. All of a sudden the whole camp, as if by a preconcerted signal, burst into what might be described as a *coda* in a major key. On inquiry next morning, one of the younger blacks (for I found the elder ones severely silent on the matter) informed me that the first part was a lament for the chief, and the short coda was a menace to the spirits of the hostile tribes present, that the death of their chief would be revenged." [Ed.]

those of a horse, eyes burning bright as stars, and their nails were long and sharp as the claws of an eagle hawk. In other respects they resembled the blacks themselves; there were both men and women amongst their number; they spoke as they did, and subsisted in the same manner. The men amongst these spirits invariably appeared with a crooked stick in their hands—not a boomerang, but a straight stick with one end crooked or bent. This stick the blacks designate *Wommolongo*. The women carried yam sticks only. These spirits do not hold communication with the ordinary members of the tribe, only with the old doctor men, such as Plungren. They are said to leave their graves at night, and return to them again when dawn approaches; and some of the blacks moreover believe that they frequent old camping places and fires. The blacks do not regard the spirits of former members of their own tribe with any fear, but look upon them as generally beneficent, though the *Limbeen* of hostile tribes are sometimes thought to use the *Wommolongo* for their destruction, and certain localities supposed to be frequented by these evil spirits are avoided. In fact they are good fellows, and amongst other services, perform in the presence of the old men corroborees and dances, and sing songs, which these old men subsequently repeat to the tribe. The spirits themselves, when about to communicate with these old men, like strangers do not at once boldly approach them, but are restrained as if by some sense of fear. First one will advance; whilst his associates hold aloof, squatting down some distance off, or resting in the branches of trees. At length, confidence having been established and this reluctance to approach overcome, the other *limbeen jar-golongs* may be heard jumping down from the trees or seen advancing. After this intercourse with the old men has finished, the latter return to the camp, there to repeat to their followers the many lessons which they themselves have learnt from these spirits.*

* As an instance of the prevalence of this belief in spirits amongst

YALAIRY.

The spirits of the dead do not for ever roam about, and hold this communication with the old men. After a while, they leave the earth, and proceed to *Yalairy*—another home.

This *Yalairy* is supposed to be amongst the stars. They know not its exact situation. The conception which the blacks form of it seems to be a mere embodiment of their views as to what constitutes happiness on earth. It is a great hunting ground, well stocked with all the game they are familiar with on earth—kangaroos, wallabies, emus, &c. They have their dogs there, and can enjoy the shade of the forest, or the clear water of the running stream. Both men and women go there. Whilst there, they hunt, eat, and sleep; but, as this new country is superior to that which they have left, so is their life happier—no anxiety on account of hunger, no sense of insecurity from enemies is ever experienced. Amongst the different animals which occupy *Yalairy*, conjointly with themselves, or are met with on their road thither, they particularly mention two large carpet snakes, which they speak of as *Koomera*. These are of prodigious size—forty miles long, according to one black-fellow's testimony. These snakes are the source of the only dread they associate with existence there. When killed and eaten, they are said to be renewed or to be replaced by two more.* The blacks have rather different ideas as to the route pursued by these spirits in gaining this *Yalairy*. The old man—Plungreen—when interrogated on the subject, pointed with his head towards the north, and other blacks, residing farther south, are said, on dying, to have gone up, as by a kind of ladder, by way of the Southern Cross.

Queensland aborigines, and as illustrating a different view held as to the nature of the spirits themselves and the functions they subserve, I may mention its occurrence amongst the blacks of the Mitchell River. In this case the spirits inspire great dread, and their influence is especially feared at night, when they are said to utter a shrill piercing cry, like that of a white owl.

* Similar to the myth of the ancient Greeks regarding the Python.

Another tribe—the *Yerunthully*—speaking a different language from that of the *Mycoolon*, and whose hunting grounds—at the head of the river Flinders—are nearly three hundred miles distant from those of the latter, believe that the ascent is made by means of a rope, and that what we call a shooting star, is merely the falling of this rope, on being let go after the ascent has been accomplished.* When the heavens have been reached, the journey to *Yalairy* is continued along the road indicated to them in the path of the Milky Way, until their destination is reached. They believe, too, that the stars are the spirits of those blacks—men, women, and children—who lived long prior to the present generation, as well as of the animals which shared with them existence then.

ASTRONOMY.

As a consequence of this phase of the belief in the future existence of their spirits, the whole phenomena of the heavens, as well as any changes in them, are regarded with much more significance than they otherwise would be, and the blacks have learnt to associate the recurrence of these changes with the ripening of particular fruits, or the visitations of certain animals, on which their subsistence depends.†

To recount what the *Mycoolon* blacks relate concerning many stars and groups of stars, would presuppose much greater

* Whether the blacks connect this rope in any way with the appearance of the tenacious gum which exudes from some of the acacias, and which they eat, I am unprepared to say; but the *Mycoolon* blacks, amongst whom this gum is known as *Thunga*, believe that falling stars strike the trees from which it is derived, and that the gum subsequently exudes at the spots where these trees have been stricken.

† According to the position of the constellation "Orion" in the heavens the blacks of the Wide Bay District knew of the flowering of the *Banksia marginata* or honey-suckle, and accordingly gathered, from a long way inland, to the coast district, where this tree is found in abundance, to suck the copious supply of honey which its flowers afford. So, too, guided by the appearance or rising of certain stars, the aborigines flock from long distances to the Bunya Mountains there to fatten on the fruit of the *Bunya*, *Auracaria Bidwillii*, during many weeks.

acquaintance with astronomy than most colonists possess. The following facts are, however, of some interest:—The sun they regard as a female; the moon—*Ngegarru*—they say is a male; and the members of one tribe, on the Saxby river, believe that it is a black-fellow, who at one time killed a lot of their people, and whom they afterwards burnt, and still point to the shadows on the moon's surface as being the scars which resulted from this execution. The *Mycoolon* blacks also explain the rising and setting of these luminaries, as well as that of the stars, by the supposition that they go beneath the earth through a hole, coming up again on the eastern side.

The evening star they have named *Yumby* which is their name for dog. The morning star is known as *Yaboroo*—bitch.

Orion's Belt, *Marbarungal*, they believe to be a great hunter who formerly dwelt amongst them.

The two dark starless spaces in the Milky Way are known as *Goonga*, and are believed to be two very old blacks who, a great while back, met their fate at Taldora on the Saxby River, where they were speared at a *Bora* meeting.

Two "black clouds," near the Southern Cross are named *Innkerberry*—the emu.

They occasionally hear a report at the time of a falling star: this they have named *Goonbor*, in allusion to a game in which the black fellows carry one another and in which the bearer lets him that is borne fall, thus occasioning a noise.

The Pleiads are known as *Munkine*—the word used to express the idea of a maiden or unmarried girl.

The *Mycoolon* blacks have no name for a comet, the appearance of which they regard with dread.*

* With reference to the subject of the knowledge of Astronomy possessed by the Aborigines, much information may be gathered from a study of a paper on the subject by Mr. W. E. Stanbridge in the Transactions of the "Philosophical Institute of Victoria," Vol. II., pp. 137-40, Melbourne, 1857, (partly reproduced by Mr. Brough Smith, "The Aborigines of Victoria," Vol. I., pp. 432-4) the statements in which have

Whether the belief in spiritual beings, higher or lower, amounts to a religion or whether all forms of religion do not presuppose such a belief I am unprepared to discuss; but intercourse with the blacks for upwards of 25 years has led me to the conclusion that they are ever mindful of the moral obligations which such beliefs as those to which I have alluded impose upon them, and which are in great measure the guiding principles in the conduct of their lives; and that, degraded as they are, in their hopes and fears they are like other people in the world, and, moreover, Lang may not have been greatly in error when he concluded that they once enjoyed a higher state of civilization than that which they now present.*

His Excellency Sir Anthony Musgrave remarked at the conclusion of the paper that he was sure the members present felt much indebted to Mr. Palmer for his interesting remarks, and that the author had in them touched on a point on which he himself had laid some stress on a previous occasion (at the inaugural meeting of the society)—namely, the very general belief entertained by those who were best able to form an opinion on

been further systematised, with the introduction of many additional facts, by Rev. P. Macpherson (*Proc. Roy. Soc. N. S. W.*, July, 1881, Vol. XV., pp. 71-75). More recently still this subject has been again dealt with by Mr. Peter Beveridge, in a paper read on 6th June, 1883, at a meeting of the Royal Society of New South Wales (*Op. Cit.*, Vol. XVII., pp. 19-74) on the Aborigines inhabiting the Lower Murray and Lower Darling, in which special reference is made to this matter. These authorities have specially mentioned the ideas entertained by the blacks respecting the Pleiades, and have pointed out the coincidence which exists between their views respecting them and those of the ancient Greeks, as given by Smith (*Dict. of Rom. and Gr. Biog. and Myth.*, Vol. III., pp. 411-12), and others.

* Those who wish to pursue this subject further will find much valuable information throughout Mr. Brough Smith's work, and especially in the chapter on Myths. (*Op. cit.* Vol. I., pp. 421-483.) Indeed I might have particularly referred to this authority in illustration of almost every fact which I have alleged.

the subject that our Australian blacks were not examples of the lowest class of men, and that there was good evidence for believing that they presented the result of a decadence from a much higher type of savage man than might at first thought have been supposed. He also stated that during his official residence in South Australia he had been in correspondence with the late eminent philologist, Dr. Bleek, who had invited him to collect what matter he could relating to the blacks, and that having done so, Dr. Bleek came to the conclusion, on grounds philological, that the Australian blacks were, linguistically, more closely related to the bushmen of South Africa than to any other savage people; and, moreover, that there was unmistakable evidence that they had at one time arrived in the development of their race at a much higher stage of civilization than that which they at present displayed. His Excellency further remarked that Mr. Palmer's statements afforded evidence of another kind in justification of such a conclusion, and were especially valuable as tending to promote inquiry on a subject which might well engage the attention of the Society.

THE RAINFALL AT BRISBANE AND INVESTIGATION AS TO ITS PERIODICITY:

COMPILED BY
B. WAGENKNECHT, Esq.

(Communicated by W. D. Nisbet, M. Inst. C. E.)

(PLATES VI.—IX.)

ALTHOUGH I have the record of the rainfall at Brisbane for only a very limited number of years, viz., since 1860, at my disposal, I nevertheless have endeavoured to obtain with these limited data, by means of cycles and curves of periodicity, the probable rainfall for future years.



Palmer, Edward. 1886. "Concerning Some Superstitions of North Queensland Aborigines." *The Proceedings of the Royal Society of Queensland* 2(2), 163–176.
<https://doi.org/10.5962/p.351051>.

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