

AN ABORIGINAL KNIFE.

By R. ETHERIDGE, Junr., Curator.

(Plate xxxvi.)

THE subject of Plate xxxvi. has been figured as a "Shark's tooth flaying knife." Edge-Partington gives an illustration of one,¹ with this explanation, but without locality. His figure represents a wooden implement fourteen and a quarter inches long, oval in section, bearing five shark's teeth, set in gum-cement, along one edge at the distal end. The proximal end is wrapped with cord, doubtless, also, gum-cement fastened.

The knife now figured is smaller, and with smaller but more numerous teeth similarly set, and similarly bound at the proximal end with both sinew and string, the string in this instance being certainly kept in position by gum-cement. The teeth are those of a shark, probably *Carcharias lamia*, Risso, eighteen in number, occupying the superior edge for more than half the length of the implement, but the distal end tooth wanting; the implement is one foot long by one and three quarter inches wide, and the section oval. The string binding extends for two and a half inches along the knife, and both it and the cement hold in position a hand or wrist cord of beaten bark string. It is said to come from the Cooktown District, and I see no reason to doubt the statement.

Two types at least of these flaying or cutting knives appear to exist amongst our Aborigines. First, we have the West Australian form, long ago figured by Admiral P. P. King,² from King George's Sound. He states that it is called *taap*, and has a handle about twelve inches long, scraped to a proximal point, and at the other end bears three or four splinters of quartz stuck in gum. It is thus used by the Blacks—"After they have put within their teeth a sufficient mouthful of seal's flesh, the remainder is held in their left hand, and with the *taap* in the other, they saw through and separate the flesh."

The Rev. J. G. Woods also gives a figure,³ but erroneously considers it as an implement to assist in climbing trees. He describes it as fourteen inches in length, thick as a man's finger, and with the quartz chips set in a groove, and held there by the cement.

¹ Edge-Partington—Album, 3rd series, 1898, pl. cxxxix., f. 1.

² King—Intertrop. and W. Coasts Australia, ii., 1829, p. 139.

³ Wood—Nat. Hist. Man., ii., p. 35.

A third illustration is given by Mr. R. B. Smyth⁴ as a "meat cutter or native knife," and termed *dabba*. He likens the handle to a portion of a spear shaft, and states that the gum used as a cementing medium is that of the "Grass Tree" (*Xanthorrhœa*). Smyth sagely remarks that "it looks like a saw, but it is really a knife, and is employed by the natives to cut flesh." Three chips are shown in his figure.

A further figure of this implement is given by Edge-Partington⁵ from a West Australian specimen in the Heape Collection, with five teeth, and twenty-one inches long. He says glass or quartz are used, and for the cementing medium "Black-boy" (*Xanthorrhœa*) gum.

The second type of knife is that now figured, the only other illustration known to me being the already quoted figure by Edge-Partington. In all probability it is used more for flaying than cutting, for when residing at Cape York, many years ago, Mr. J. A. Thorpe, Taxidermist to this Museum, saw a similar implement used for flaying wallaby by the Yardikin and Unduamo Tribes of that neighbourhood.

⁴ Smyth—Aborigines of Victoria, i., 1878, p. 341, f. 151.

⁵ Edge-Partington—Album, 1st series, 1890, pl. cccxlviii., f. 4.



Etheridge, Robert. 1902. "An Aboriginal knife." *Records of the Australian Museum* 4, 207–208. <https://doi.org/10.3853/j.0067-1975.4.1902.1097>.

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