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BURIAL CUSTOMS

Murchison area

BURIAL

Different methods of burial obtained not only amongst the various Murchison tribes, but also amongst local groups within the tribes.

The wajari people of Mt. Magnet buried their dead with the head to the east, feet west, eyes looking towards the west. The feet are, however, placed in the direction of the dead man's (or woman's) country and the methods of burial of that country is followed, if it is known to the tribe in whose territory the person died.

Amongst the Illimbirree district wajari, the corpse is buried in a sitting posture, the eyes looking towards the dead man's own country. A bush shelter or breakwind is made and afterwards burnt. Bardain is the Illimberree name for the home of the dead. It is wilu (west) and spirits travel over the sea to get there.

The Yalgoo wajari buried their dead with the head towards the north, feet south, eyes looking towards the sunrise. Some wajari have buried their dead face downwards, the limbs being sometimes broken and bent, the hole or grave being a little over three feet in length. Other wajari of the district north of Yalgoo make two drives at the bottom of the hole and bury the corpse lengthwise, forcing the head and feet into the drives, which were made north and south.

Tukanara wajari were buried seated cross legged with hands resting on thighs, eyes looking towards the sunrise. A half circle of bushes and a smaller one of earth, were made round the grave with the opening towards the north. A miru was sometimes placed in the centre of the half circle of earth and a fire placed in front of the half circle. The place was cleaned and swept for some yards round the grave. The half circle of bushes, if these can be found in the vicinity, is always placed round the graves of the Murchison tribes. If these are not available, a half circle of earth is made. When making the grave the Wajari first loosen the sand with a wanna (woman's digging stick) and then throw the soil in two regulated heaps on top, one of which afterwards forms a small semicircle at the head of the grave,

the other heap is put on top of the corpse. If it is a hurried burial, two or more wanna may be used and a thaga (wooden vessel) lifts the soil - shovel fashion - from the hole. The thaga remains on the grave, as it could never be used again after having helped to make a grave.

The home of the Tuckanarra dead is called Kuganmara and is supposed to be away north over the sea.

Jal, a Ngaiawonga, stated that the graves of his people (Yander, near Lake Way) were usually wider and longer at the bottom than at the top, a drive such as the Wajari make, being sometimes dug at either end, the head and feet being pushed into the drives. The grave was usually in a north and south direction, and within it the body was placed with the feet towards the north, head south and eyes looking towards the sunrise. Logs were first placed on the body, then branches were laid across the logs, and the remaining space was filled up with sand.

The ground was smoothed and levelled for some distance from the foot of the grave. Round the head of the mound a half circle of boughs was evenly built.

The Ngaiawonga dead were supposed to go west to the neighbourhood of Tehugarerã, where they become mundang (spirits) and where they may be heard crying out at intervals, "Yinorni, yinorni."

Mobarn yamagi in the neighbourhood of Tehugareri can see the mundang at night time, but all within hearing can hear their cry.

The Lake Way Ngaiawonga buried their dead with the head towards the east, the feet west, the eyes looking towards the east. Spears were broken and left near the grave, the miru and other weapons being left where the man died. The Lake Way grave is circular. When finished, bindi-bindi (shaved sticks) may be placed round the circle. No earth covers the body, only logs of wood and branches. A fire is lighted between the grave and the camp, or eastward of the grave, which means that the spirit is expected to go west.

Amongst the Wajari at Nannine, burial takes place almost immediately after death, usually within two hours. A shallow grave is dug about five feet in length, three in width, and

about two feet deep. The corpse is placed face downwards, head to the east, and sometimes, but not always, the joints of the knees, ankles, elbows and wrists are broken or dislocated. The arms are drawn round to the back and the legs doubled back. Stones or logs are put on top of the body, and a little earth covers them.

For mourning, the Nannine district natives put a line of wilgee down the centre of the nose and forehead. The father of the deceased shaves off his beard and smears charcoal on his face, the mother greasing her body and then rubbing it all over with wilgee. The camp and belongings of the dead man are destroyed.

At Nyingarree (N.W. of Peak Hill) where Ngadawonga, Wajari and Kurduwonga meet, the head is west, the feet east, the body sometimes buried face downwards. Knees and thighs are tied together and the hands placed beside the thighs. Miru, guilba, (spear) and wunda (shield) are burnt. A fire is made eastward of the corpse and a breakwind is put west of the grave at the head.

Very often the head of the corpse is not a foot underneath the ground. A half circle or an entire circle of sand may be made round the grave. At Boogardie on the Murchison, the natives being Wajari were buried similarly to the Mt. Magnet Wajari. A breakwind may sometimes be built over the grave. A fire is lighted and the district abandoned for a time.

Sanford River Wajari bury their dead with the head towards the west, feet east, eyes looking towards the sunrise, the hands being held towards the north. The body is covered with barga (logs or bushes) and a tarndi (hut) is built and a fire lighted eastward of the grave. Bagan yaminyardu is the term applied to the departure of the relatives to another camp after a death.

Amongst the Waiawonga of Lake Nabberoo, if the dead man or woman belonged to the east, their faces and feet were turned eastward and so with those from other points of the compass, the methods of burial in the dead man's district being followed, if known. The hands were placed beside the limbs. The weapons of the dead man and the utensils of the woman were left undisturbed in their camp, with the exception of the spears, which were

broken in half, one of the broken spears being placed on the grave at the foot of the corpse. The wanna of the dead woman was not broken, and might also be placed at the head or feet.

A half circle of bushes was placed round the grave and a fire was lighted in front of the grave.

At Warngun (Waianwonga district) the head is yabaru (north-west), the feet waramala (southeast.) The corpse is sometimes laid on its face. The arms are folded. If it^{is}/an old man, the fingers and thumb are sometimes tied and the nails burnt off. Weapons are burnt, spears broken and the miru placed on the grave, most frequently at the head,

At Yeedeling, the Waianwonga place, the head is west, the feet east, the eyes looking east. Legs and thighs are tied, and arms are also tied. The miru is sometimes placed upright on the mangargu (grave), the spears of the dead man being broken.

The Mindula Wajari buried their dead face downwards, the head being west, the feet east. The knees were bent and broken and the hands placed close to them. Two heaps of sand were piled north and south of the grave. The usual half circle of bushes was placed round the head of the grave and a space of some yards in width cleared all round. A fire was lighted between the grave and the camp. Miro or wanna were placed on the grave according to the sex of the deceased.

During my visit to Mindula, the death by burning of a native woman named Burdangu, a Yalgoo district Wajari, occurred at the camp. The moment the breath had left her body, every occupant of the camp broke into loud cries, and at once deserted the camp and proceeded to make a new one some quarter of a mile away. The death having occurred late in the evening was the reason for the desertion of the camp, as no native will knowingly spend a night in company with a newly dead man, woman or child, their reason being that the spirit hovers immediately over the body as soon as it has left its clay tenement, "as it is not sure where to go." The natives kept up their keening during the whole

night, and at dawn next morning were back at camp attending to the last sad rites. They wrapped the body of Buriangu in her rug, and carried her by a roundabout route to the place chosen for her burial, which was quite two miles from the camp. A great fear was upon the occupants of the camp that her spirit might not find its way to Yaigoo and hence become a lost spirit, or one that might return to the vicinity of the camp and work harm upon the dwellers there and so the circuitous route was taken - about two miles - in order to baffle the spirit and prevent it finding its way back to the camp.

Before they removed the body, one of the daughters-in-law of the dead woman made a miniature grave, in an east and west direction, on the exact spot where Buriangu had died. In this little mound her wanna and a piece of an old skirt which she had worn, were stuck at the western ends. A similar proceeding followed the death at Katanning of a Bridgetown native. They then proceeded to burn the dead woman's camp, raking everything into the fire so that nothing should be left to work magic with or on. The little grave was to show where Buriangu had last lain, the pieces of burnt material telling her absent relatives the manner of her death.

As soon as the little grave was completed, all started for the place of burial; brother-in-law, brother and son, took it in turns to dig the grave, which in the old days would have been dug with the thagga and wanna (scoop and stick.) The hole was dug about four feet six in depth, but at a depth of about three feet, the diggers proceeded to make a small drive at either end, for the graves of some of the Murchison people are larger at the bottom than at the top. The drives went in about fourteen inches at either end. The grave was dug in a north and south direction. When the grave was completed, fresh boughs, which had been gathered by the women while the men were digging, were placed by Buriangu's son at the bottom of the grave, and as soon as the boughs were fixed, Mindinga, the son, lay down in it to see if it were wide enough. The sand that had been taken out of the hole was made into little mounds at either side of the grave. They then lowered the body with the aid of the rugs and Mindinga stood in the

grave with his feet at either side of his mother's body, in order to push the head and feet into the drives made for them. Curiously enough, the body had not become stiff, and so it was easy to press the feet into the hollowed out drive. Logs were then placed on the body, then boughs, then some earth of ants' nests which the brother of the dead woman had collected in the vicinity of the grave, then more logs and again ants' nests until the grave was filled. Meanwhile the women were busy all the time cleaning a space round the grave. The trees and shrubs were cut down and burnt, even the grass tufts being uprooted, so that when the spirit should walk about the grave, no obstacle should impede the movements. They cut, burnt and raked up everything. The daughter-in-law gathered some logs and with these she made a semicircular shelter or breakwind at the head of the grave, placing small green boughs regularly and neatly along the half circle until a mound shaped outline was made. This semi circle was quite four yards in diameter. Buriangu's wanna was put on the logs and hidden by the small boughs. The grave mound which rose about a foot above the ground was trimmed and swept to a length of about three feet six inches and about two feet in width. A radius of some thirty yards had been cleared and levelled round the grave, so that the spirit should walk on soft ground. Buriangu's feet were placed in the direction of her Yalgoo home, for she had been stolen by her husband from that district, and it was a belief amongst them that a native must first go to his own home, before he can start for the home of the dead. If he did not he might find himself in the camp of some strange tribe. Hence every native likes to die on his own ground as "his spirit will know the way from there" to the country where all his dead relatives are. When the spirit comes out of the grave it goes where the feet point. Fires were lighted north, north east, south, and south-east, to prevent the spirit going in any other direction than its proper one. The new camp had been made eastward of the old one, showing that the spirit was not expected to go eastward. Perfect silence, except for the soft sobbing of the women, reigned during the whole time and the journey back to the camp was also made in

silence. In the evening, however, at the exact moment of the woman's death, the mourning keen was again raised and it continued at intervals throughout the night. Another son of Buriangu who had reached the camp towards nightfall, lifted his voice in loud and heart-breaking lamentations almost the whole night through. Buriangu's wannara ("mate" or friend) an older woman, who had neither eaten nor drunk for two days after the death of her friend, "keened" both morning and evening during the whole ten days of my stay at Mindula, and probably for many days afterwards, for Buriangu had been "food getter" for her friend who was too old to fend for herself, and there was no one in camp to take her place. The members of the camp did not leave the district for a month after Buriangu's death.

The Mindula names for the country of the dead are : Ngocora-gocora, Weelooga (west) and Barnad'ad'erba.

Food and water may sometimes be left near the grave of the Murchison dead, but this is not general. A rough track is made for some distance in an opposite direction to the camp and to the route taken by the bearers of the corpse, the idea being that when the spirit of the dead man came up he would go along the made track and so keep away from the camp of his relatives. The laws of burial must be strictly adhered to or the spirit will return "sulky" and will harm those who neglect to perform the proper rites. The nails of ~~some~~ of the Murchison natives do not appear to be burnt, nor are their hands tied.

Only two cases of premature burial were mentioned by the natives, one occurring at Landy Creek on the Gascoyne, westward of the Kurduwonga, the other in the Northampton district.

An old native woman was supposed to have died and was buried by her people near Landy Creek. She had died during the night, and early in the morning they buried her and returned to their new camp. Between sunset and dusk they were horrified to hear a cry coming from the direction of the grave, and looking towards the spot they perceived the supposed dead woman who was running towards them. Every member of the camp jumped up and fled from the mundang (spirit) or warda (ghost) as they thought it was, and

kept running until they fell down from fatigue. The woman continued running after them, falling several times from weakness and shock. She kept calling out to them that she was not dead, but they did not stop running until darkness had well set in.

The old woman finally came up to them, and she lived with them for many years. They did not revisit the neighbourhood until some years after the incident.

The other case occurred in the Northampton district. A native had been buried the previous evening and in the morning when his parents went to visit the grave, he had got out of it, and as soon as he saw them approaching he got up and chased them. He ran after them for two or three days, allowing them neither rest, food, nor sleep. At last when they were almost dead from weariness and exhaustion, the father turned round and thrust his spear into the son's body many times and then left him where he lay for other relatives to bury him.

The son never "returned" again and when the relatives went to the grave where he had first lain, his body was not in the grave, which would have been the case if he had been a real mung-dang. They saw the marks of his hands and feet beside the grave, and tracked him where he had chased his parents.

Mourning

The custom of mourning is followed in all the tribes of the Upper Murchison, a certain similarity in the customs being observed amongst the Ngadawonga and kindred tribes.

At the moment of death, a wild keen is raised by everyone in camp and continues for some time throughout the day and evening. If the dead man leaves one or more widows, they cut and gash their heads and thighs, blood flowing copiously from the wounds and falling over their faces and limbs. This appears to be the first mourning ceremony. Then while the elders are straightening, or tying up the corpse, according to the mode of burial prevailing, the other relatives proceed to decorate themselves in mourning colours. The widows of the dead man will cut off their hair, and place it in the nguri (skin bag) to be spun later into string.

They then paint their faces with lines of white pipeclay and charcoal, the men using charcoal only or charcoal and duari (red ochre). The older men, also decorated in mourning colours, assemble near the dead man and all may ask him in a sort of recitative, "to go away for good and not trouble them by coming back again." Occasionally only one or two of the older men will sing round the corpse, the remainder of the men standing or sitting near, with heads bowed down upon their breasts.

It is usually the ngabari of the dead man who perform the last offices and these are decorated with duari only during the time the corpse remains in camp, adding some charcoal when the burial is over.

The widows of the dead man withdraw a little apart and sit in silence under the shade of a few boughs. Here they remain for some days, the time depending greatly upon circumstances. For instance, if a brother of the dead man, whose inheritance the widows are, be present at the time of death and the widows are young, not many days elapse before they join the camp. If there are no claimants for them, dissensions rise amongst the men of their marrying class almost immediately. The widows, still sitting apart, and keeping the bright lines of pipeclay on their features, remain silent and motionless throughout the discussion. Food will be brought to them by juari, for there seems no special abstinence from food after a death, except from the totem of the dead man, if it is an animal or bird totem.

The Ngadawonga women stated that they did not now wear the pipeclay head covering which is the symbol of widowhood on the Upper Murchison, but it had been the custom for elderly widows to smear pipeclay over their heads and foreheads, allowing it to remain until it dropped off. Young widows do not wear this mourning headdress.

The mobarn yamagi of the group will watch for indications which will tell him the direction from the which the magic that killed their relative, has come from and if it a very old man or woman whose death has taken place, return magic will be

sent to the offending tribe. In the case of the death of a young native man, an avenging party, or a brother of the dead man only, will be sent out on a mission of vengeance. On these occasions, slippers made of hair string and emu feathers will be worn to disguise the identity of the avenger. The Waianwonga call these slippers Woningi, the name applied to the web-shaped headdress in other tribes, the webbed headdress being called mongi by the Waianwonga.

Mourning ceremonies have lost much of their interest amongst the Murchison natives, owing to their contact with the white people, and except the wailing or keening which occurs in all the tribes on the death of one of their number, there is very little, if any, ceremony of mourning carried out nowadays. The older men harangue the spirit at night time for one or two nights, and a little charcoal or pipeclay or duari may be smeared on the face once, and then allowed to drop off. On the death of Kadjaabhdja at Meekatharra, no mourning beyond the keening was practised. The camp was moved to a fresh spot, and Kadabada was forgotten.

For some time after the death of a member of a local group, the keening will be heard, at the hour the death occurred, but in all cases it is the women who keep up the keen while the camp remains in the vicinity.

Amongst those tribes that are yet untouched by civilisation, the ceremonies of mourning, etc., are carried out minutely, but no description of these was available.

Mrs. Searle of Tuckanarra, Murchison district, informed me recently that in consequence of some native murder having been committed in a district eastward of Tuckanarra, all the Wajari people whose near or distant relative the murdered man was, were forbidden by the mobarn yamagi of their group to decorate themselves with red until the murder had been avenged. A woman who had been given a red frock brought it to Mrs. Searle for safe keeping until the "edict" had been revoked. Lawless and other eastern tribes were implicated in the murder, a man named Koyt being the chief aggressor, if not the actual murderer. This is

the first instance on record of a special law relating to the general prohibition of red ochre decorations, while preparations for revenge were in progress. No meaning for the prohibition could be ascertained.

Notebook 4b, P. 4

TuradaBarduwonga tribeBURIAL

The head is placed kaiali (E.N.E.) and the feet, or rather thighs, yulbari (S.). The legs are tied up against the thighs and spread apart, arms are also tied, the hands being upwards beside the head. The head rests on some bushes, the body being laid on its back, with the thighs spread apart.