

NGILGI

An Aboriginal Woman's Life Story

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Ngilgi came into her Bibbulmun world rather dramatically. Her mother Wooragan was stealing potatoes from a Busselton <sup>Reefery</sup> garden, and, being caught in the act, was about to be ~~arrested~~ <sup>scolded</sup> when the <sup>sudden</sup> advent of the baby solved the problem. Wooragan said,

"This is my baby's ground now, and I can't steal any more potatoes."

"Then," said the young white woman, "we will take care of you and your baby," and in the years that followed Wooragan and her baby divided their days between the white man's home and their own. White settlement had only taken place some 20 years previously, and settlers' homes were few and far between, and the young gentlewomen of those days had to set themselves to learn all farming and domestic duties from the servants they had brought out with them, realising that with the termination of their contract the imported helps would seek independence for themselves.

~~Ngilgi's name was given her by her father Weedugit from a small woorark (now extinct marsupial) he was about to spear and which vanished just as he raised his spear. "Ah", he said, "yalgai yookan geej darning" (if it had stood a little longer I would have speared it). 'Yalgai' became 'Ngilgi', and the woorark was given her as her personal totem, her father's group totem and main group food being the emu. In accordance with Bibbulmun law, Ngilgi was betrothed in infancy to a "mother's brother's son", whose group totem was the kangaroo, and after her babyhood had passed she was frequently left with her adopted white parents and shared in the lessons and duties and games of her white sisters and brothers. She became as familiar as they <sup>white children</sup> with white laws, social systems, conventions, <sup>British social systems</sup> and class distinctions, but she was equally familiar with every law of her own people, and though she learned to speak the refined English of her little sisters and sang hymns and repeated psalms and collects on Sundays, and learned the poems and fables taught by the fine young pioneer mothers of those days, Ngilgi <sup>learned</sup> the laws, traditions, myths and legends of her own people.~~

on the potato patch

Dajjelak Betrothed

Up and down the coast Ngilgi wandered with her group, performing all the tasks and duties of Bibbulmun women. The gentle pioneer women who had adopted her laid no restraint upon her, and when she returned she resumed her old place with them and shared in their work and play.

She worked for many of the young white women of those days, and had many a story to tell of successes and lapses, ~~but she nursed one little baby that afterwards became a fine public servant, and~~ <sup>but</sup> she was always liked and trusted by the whites, for her early associations having been among gentlefolk, she had unconsciously absorbed their ways and manners and fine principles, and the "wild" in her blood was that of the best of her own Bibbulmun type.

By and by Ngilgi's betrothed came to claim her.

"You have another wife at your maia," <sup>(rough & helen)</sup> said Ngilgi, "I won't make your fire unless you send her away."

"But she is my <sup>deajelut</sup> betrothed wife, too," said the bewildered man.

"I will be the only wife in my husband's maia," said Ngilgi.

The rejected betrothed made a virtue of necessity and told Ngilgi he could get plenty other wives. "Perhaps you might," grinned Ngilgi, "go and get them. I will find my own husband."

Ngilgi's refusal would have meant her death by a brother in the old days, but white settlement had banished <sup>their age-old strict-marriage</sup> ~~this age-old law.~~ <sup>laws.</sup>

Ngilgi's first choice fell, unhappily, on a half caste, and the couple were started on their way in life by the kindly white family with whom Ngilgi had sojourned so happily. But the half-caste had a roving eye, and Ngilgi cast him off as summarily as she had dismissed her betrothed. From that time on she picked and chose her mates as she pleased, and discarded them at will, her most effective weapon being one she had learned from some "Biddy Moriarty" among the settlers. Biddy's one weapon was a bucket of cold water thrown over her drunken, quarrelsome husband, and when Ngilgi saw its effects for offence and defence, she applied it at once to lazy or unfaithful husbands.

Apart from her amatory adventures Ngilgi had one great passion. She loved and coveted every dog that came her way. She would work for weeks for no other payment than a little dog she fancied.

She was about 60 years old when the writer met her on the

Native Reserve at the foot of the Darling Range in the early 1900's; she had then 32 dogs, seven goats, a dozen fowls, four aboriginal suitors, and a half-caste aspirant. A kindly understanding Government had given her a plot of ground, fenced for flower and vegetable growing, a hut, and even a double bed and spring mattress, for Ngilgi's dogs were her fur rug at night and 32 dogs and a hefty woman required a full-sized double bed. The dogs were of every imaginable breed, the largest being a composite of terrier, mastiff and collie, and the smallest a <sup>small</sup> little King Charles spaniel, not a foot in length, with only two working legs, half an eye, and rickets. Ngilgee loved them all, and refused to believe evil of them. Young kids and a sick fowl were sometimes added to the living blankets at night, yet in spite of dogs and fowls and goats, Ngilgi had five suitors, Monnop of the dingo totem, Woolberr of the black swan totem, Bimba of the turkey totem, and Baaburgurt of the sea mullet totem. Baaburgurt and Woolberr were almost blind, but Bimba and Monnop were only a little over 60, and these two bashed each other whenever they got on the reserve, always hoping that Ngilgi would favour the victor. Baaburgurt relied upon a "soothing" tongue, and Woolberr on his gifts as a singer and dancer. Ngilgi regarded all four with a complacent eye, and then there entered the young half caste, young enough to be her grandson. Perhaps memories of her first half caste stirred Ngilgi. At any rate she said to Jimmy, "I will take you, and when I go out washing you can stay and mind my dogs and things and I will bring you plenty of good food."

Jimmy saw endless days of food and warmth and money from the washing, and he accepted Ngilgi's conditions, but he reckoned without the rejected suitors who joined forces against the "yellow dingo who never had a father".

Monnop threatened him with physical violence, Bimba with deadly magic; Woolberr sang evil things at him, and Baaburgurt hit out wildly with his stick every time he came within reach of the half-caste odour.

Jimmy fled, Baaburgurt "turned dog" in a sense, consoled with Ngilgi, condemned Monnop and Bimba and Woolberr for their

cruelty to Jimmy, and so soothed Ngilgi that it was not surprising to find him on his way to Ngilgi's hut a few days after Jimmy's flight. Baaburgurt entered the hut, the dogs protesting loudly or feebly according to size. Then followed the goats, the fowls and Ngilgi bringing up the rear.

Very early next morning a great medley of sound-in which dogs, goats, fowls and Baaburgurt's quavering voice might be distinguished- issued from Ngilgi's maia and presently the door opened and poor Baaburgurt was thrust forth with a bucket of cold water thrown over him to quicken his movements. It was a cold, misty morning, and a dripping, shivering, howling and roaring Baaburgurt came staggering over to ~~the~~ <sup>my</sup> camp. Monnop and Bimba saw the plight of their brother man, and getting blankets and clothes and hot tea, all three came to his assistance. They stripped and rubbed him, warmed and fed him, ~~and~~ <sup>the</sup> while he wailed in minute detail his experience as a twelve-hour's husband. In the midst of the recital, in which dogs, goats and fowls had played their part, the amazing Ngilgi strode out of her hut, carrying a generous helping of damper and meat, and a billy of tea, which she brought and laid beside Baaburgurt. "I want no man," she said, "but I threw water on you and I am giving you food for drenching you."

Jimmy never ventured again on the Reserve. Monnop and Bimba fought on until Monnop's jawbone was broken and Bimba's ribs smashed in, when both men went back to their dingo and turkey group areas to die. Woolberr was run over by a train and killed, and Baaburgurt was taken to his own group-home district, as the only living member of a once big sea <sup>(Kaldia)</sup> mullet totem group, and cared for by the kindly Layman family whose father Baaburgurt's own father had killed.

Ngilgi lived on the Reserve until one day the policeman caught her napping and put every one of her 32 dogs out of its misery. Then she shook the dust of the reserve off her feet for ever and wended her way to her old white friends. She was welcomed everywhere, for she had never learned to drink or smoke or steal, and she always responded to courtesy with her own native good manners.