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### MESSAGE-STICKS USED BY THE ABORIGINES OF AUSTRALIA

R. H. MATHEWS

Message-sticks or, as they are sometimes called, "talking-sticks" or "black fellows' letters," have occasionally been referred to by writers on the customs of the Australian aborigines, but comparatively little information has yet been recorded on this subject. From inquiries I have made personally and through numerous correspondents in different parts of Australia, I am forced to the conclusion that the value of "stick-letters" as a means of conveying information from one tribe to another at a distance has been considerably overrated and misunderstood. To the student of ethnology, however, they are highly interesting as showing an attempt by a primitive and uncultivated people to develop some method of communicating their thoughts to persons at another place by means of symbols. Speaking generally, the stick is given to the messenger to assist him in remembering the heads of the message by connecting them with certain pictures, marks, or notches cut upon it, which are explained to him before he sets out on his journey. The stick also serves as his credentials, being a confirmation or guarantee of the genuineness of the message.

These message-sticks are pieces of wood of different sizes, varying in length from an inch and a half to eighteen inches or more. They are in some cases flat pieces of wood, ornamented more or less by carving, and were often painted a bright color; in other instances they are merely a rounded piece of wood or rod cut from the branch of a tree or sapling; while a still more primitive kind are made of a piece of bark. Instances have been observed where marked pieces of bone were used in a similar manner. They are marked in various ways, consisting of notches, dots, strokes, curves, and also with triangular, quadrilateral, and zigzag devices. In some of the more elaborately carved there are rude representations of human beings, while in some tribes they are not marked at all, but consist of a plain piece of wood. "Stick-letters" summoning festive gatherings are sometimes

decorated with the down of birds, with or without other marks. In some tribes the wood used for making the stick must be of the same class<sup>1</sup> as the sender of the message, and the messenger who carries it must also belong to that class. Many of the devices on these sticks are apparently for ornamentation only, and would depend upon the artistic skill of the maker. The marks are made with a piece of sharp stone, bone, or broken shell. Plate VII shows a number of message-sticks used by the natives of the following rivers in New South Wales and Queensland: Culgoa, Narran, Cudnappa, Bokhara, Cuttaburra, Birie, Mungalah, Clark, and Basalt. (See "description of plate VII" at the end of this article.)

"Talking sticks" appear to have been made according to some conventional design known among the tribes using them. One kind of stick is used for a corroboree where a large number of people assemble; another is used to convey messages or reminders between friends residing at some distance from each other; a certain sort of stick would be used for festive gatherings; another in cases of sickness or death, and so on. These sticks, differing perhaps but little in general appearance, would nevertheless be recognized by the people inhabiting the tract of country in which they were used, and would thus to a certain extent have a more or less fixed significance, which would, however, be very much restricted and of little use unless accompanied by a verbal explanation by the bearer.

Message-sticks are used in summoning an assemblage for hostile purposes, a meeting for corroboree, and in many cases of less importance. The messenger who carries the stick and the message is generally a young man, strong and active and a good traveler, who is, therefore, well qualified to satisfactorily discharge his duties. He is generally more or less known among, or is related to, the tribes he visits, and is to some extent acquainted with their dialect. On his arrival at the men's camp he hands the message-stick to the person to whom he has been directed to deliver it, giving the name of the sender and explaining the meaning. The party who receives the "stick-letter" carries it with him when he goes to the place to which he has been invited. Sticks conveying friendly messages or greetings would be carried

<sup>1</sup> See my papers on "The Kamilaroi Class System," *Proc. Roy. Geog. Soc. Aust. (Q.)*, x, 18-34; "Australian Class Systems," *American Anthropologist*, ix, 411-416.

by women or youths, as well as by the men. There being no urgency for the speedy delivery of these friendly messages, they are not generally sent direct, but may be a long time in reaching their destination. A messenger sent to a tribe to report the death of a relative or person with whom they were acquainted would have his face painted with pipe-clay.

The bearer of a message is never molested by any of the tribes through whose country he may have occasion to travel while engaged on this duty, even although the people through whom he may pass are not on friendly terms with his tribe. As far as I can learn, this rule is of universal prevalence among native tribes throughout the continent, and a breach of it would lead to retaliation.

Mr F. G. Jackson, in his work "The Great Frozen Land" (1895), says: "All the primitive tribes of northern Europe used wood, bone, and stone to write and cipher upon. Du Chaillu, in his 'Viking Age,' tells how the Norsemen wrote upon staves of whale-bone, and how they tied hair to their letters of communication—just, strange to say, as the aboriginal Australians do today. I have seen some Australian talking-sticks with hair tied on the end of them, so that the recipient of the letter might the more easily know who sent it to him. The Australians, like the Norsemen, write also on bones as well as wood. A lady from whom I got some of my talking-sticks showed me a bone—the fibula of a kangaroo—with native characters on it."

The practice of using marked pieces of wood to accompany messages sent from one tribe to another may have been copied from some of the invading races who came to Australia in the remote past, and has been handed down in a rude form to the present time. The custom has been observed among the aborigines in different parts of Australia, but was much more highly developed in some districts than in others, and was, so far as I can learn, altogether unknown among some tribes. The latter statement should, however, be tested by further investigation.

Meetings for the performance of the initiation ceremonies are summoned by a messenger carrying a bull-roarer, the several articles of a man's dress, some native weapons, and occasionally a quartz crystal. A message-stick was also sometimes carried in addition to these emblems. As I have given very complete details of how these important messages are delivered in my papers

describing the initiation ceremonies<sup>1</sup> of several native tribes, it is unnecessary for me to refer to them further in this paper.

Although the Australian "stick-letters" were not of themselves sufficient to convey any intelligible meaning, there appears to be some evidence that they were to a certain extent a rude kind of picture-writing, which would perhaps have developed into a more connected and useful form in course of time. It is well known that gesture language was more or less extensively recognized and understood among all Australian tribes. Gesture language may be called "idea-speaking," and pictographs "idea-writing." It has been said that written syllabaries and alphabets have been developed from pictographs, and it is suggested that in the picture-writing of different races the beginnings of our modern manuscripts and printed books are to be found.

It is hoped that some of the residents of those districts in which the custom still prevails will take advantage of their opportunities to accurately copy and fully describe as many as possible of these message-sticks, in order that additional light may be thrown upon a subject which is but little understood at present, and also, if possible, to enable a comparison to be made between Australian picture-writing and that of the peoples of other countries.

As bearing upon the subject of native drawings possessing a possible symbolical significance, I may refer the reader to several papers communicated by me to different scientific journals on the rock paintings and carvings<sup>2</sup> of the Australian blacks, and also on some remarkable drawings on the ground and on trees<sup>3</sup> executed by the same people.

The territory within which the message-sticks herein described were used is about 250 miles in length by a width of about 200 miles, and is distant about 600 miles from Sydney. It is situated partly in New South Wales and partly in Queensland, and

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<sup>1</sup> "The Burbung of the Wiradthuri Tribes," *Journ. Anthropol. Inst.*, London, xxv, 295-318; *ibid.*, xxvi, 272-285. "The Bora of the Kamilaroi Tribes," *Proc. Roy. Soc. Victoria*, ix, n. s., 137-173. "The Bunan Ceremony of New South Wales," *American Anthropologist*, Washington, ix, 327-344. "The Keeparra Ceremony of Initiation," *Journ. Anthropol. Inst.*, London, xxvi, 320-338, plate xxxii. "The Wandarral of the Richmond and Clarence Tribes," *Proc. Roy. Soc. Victoria*, X, n. s., art. iv, May, 1897.

<sup>2</sup> "The Rock Paintings and Carvings of the Australian Aborigines," *Journ. Anthropol. Inst.*, London, xxv, 145-163, plates xiv, xv, xvi.

<sup>3</sup> "Australian Ground and Tree Drawings," *American Anthropologist*, ix, 33-49, one plate, figs. 1 to 36.

is watered by the Narran, Culgoa, Warrego, and other rivers. I obtained the message-sticks and all the details respecting them from Mr James E. Miller, a police trooper stationed at Goodooga township. He has been traveling through that district in the discharge of his official duties for some years past and is well acquainted with the numerous aboriginal population, who still preserve their ancient customs. The information was not gathered by him all at once, but as opportunities offered during the last two or three years. After I had this paper drafted I sent it to Mr Miller and asked him to compare the descriptions of the message-sticks by a further reference to the natives who gave him the details. It was more than half a year before he had a chance of seeing all the men whom he had previously got the particulars from, and when he returned the draft to me no material alterations were found necessary. Mr Miller displayed great patience and industry in dealing with a difficult subject, and it is hoped others will follow his example.

The use of message-sticks by the Australian aborigines as a means of communication between different tribes has been referred to by different writers on the customs of these people, but most of them are too fragmentary to be of any use to the scientific investigator. Among the most important of these the following names may be mentioned: In 1878, Mr R. B. Smyth published a work,<sup>1</sup> in which he describes three message-sticks, with illustrative drawings. Mr E. M. Curr, in 1886, gave drawings and descriptions of two message-sticks used by some tribes of which he treats.<sup>2</sup> In 1889, Mr A. W. Howitt described some of these sticks which he had received from different districts, to which he added a plate showing several figures.<sup>3</sup>

*Description of Plate VII.*

The message-sticks illustrated in this plate have all been reproduced by me from the originals, which are in my possession, and are accurately drawn to scale. The locality from which they have been obtained has been stated in each case, and their purport, as given by the aborigines, has been recorded as fully as practicable.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Aborigines of Victoria*, I, 354-355.

<sup>2</sup> *The Australian Race*, I, 150.

<sup>3</sup> *Journ. Anthrop. Inst.*, London, XVIII, 314-332.

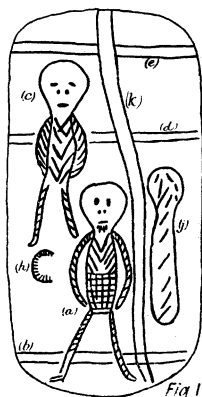


Fig 1

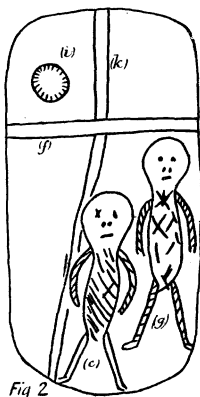


Fig 2



Fig 3



Fig 4



Fig 5



Fig 6



Fig 7



Fig 8



Fig 9

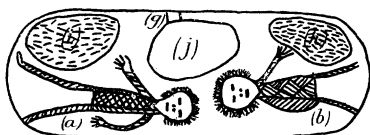
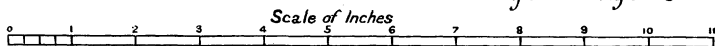


Fig 10

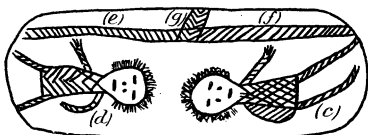


Fig 11



Fig 12

R.H. Mathews del:.

Figures 1 and 2.—The message-stick here represented is made of the wood of the cuttibundi tree, known to white men as quinine or Peruvian bark. Its length is six inches and an eighth, its breadth a little over three inches, and its thickness slightly exceeding three-eighths of an inch.

This is a message from Nanee, Kumbo Kangaroo, a head-man of the Culgoa tribe, to Belay, Kubbi Iguana, one of the head-men of the Tinanburra tribe. Nanee handed the stick to a black fellow named Imball, Kubbi Iguana, at Goodooga, on the Bokhara river, New South Wales, who conveyed it to Belay at Tinanburra, on the Cuttaburra river, Queensland, the distance between the two places being about 100 miles. When handing the stick to Belay, Imball told him that Nanee and his tribe wished to meet him (Belay) and his tribe on the Cudnappa river for the purpose of holding a corroboree. Imball further explained to Belay the devices on the stick as follows, which will be better understood by referring to plate VII: Nanee (*a*) sent the message from the Bokhara river (*b*), by the hand of Imball (*c*), via the Birie (*d*), the Culgoa (*e*), and Cudnappa (*f*) rivers, to Belay (*g*); that the stick was dispatched at new moon (*h*), and Belay and his tribe are expected to be at Cudnappa river (*f*) at full moon (*i*); (*j*) represents a corroboree ground, and Belay understands from it that Nanee and his tribe are corroboreeing at the Bokhara river, which is their *taorai*, and, further, that on the meeting of the two tribes at full moon on the Cudnappa river a big corroboree will be held.

The messenger, Imball, is shown standing beside Belay, which conveys the meaning that he will remain with the latter until he and his tribe are ready to start for the place of meeting, and that he, the messenger, will accompany them thither. The route taken by Imball in going from Goodooga to Tinanburra is shown at (*k*). From Belay's knowledge of the distance from the Bokhara river to the place of meeting on the Cudnappa river, he would know that the Culgoa tribe would require to start for the Bokhara very soon after he received the message at Tinanburra. Nanee and his tribe would have to travel about 70 miles and Belay and his tribe about 30 miles to reach the place of meeting.

Figures 3 and 4.—This message-stick was sent from Goodooga, on the Bokhara river, by a black fellow named Kubbi Iguana to his friend Yarri, Murri Iguana, residing at Angledool, on the



Narran river, inviting the latter to bring his tribe to Goodooga to a corroboree which was shortly to take place. The two places mentioned are in New South Wales and are about 60 miles distant from each other.

The stick is six inches and one-eighth in length, one inch and one-eighth broad at the widest part, and five-sixteenths of an inch thick along the middle, tapering almost to an edge at the sides and ends. The front side, figure 3, has a rude drawing of a man, about four inches long, apparently decorated for the dance. At each side of and below the human figure are a number of crosses, 34 in all, and below these are some straight and curved lines. There are ten notches, five on each side, nearly opposite to each other. The native stated that the stripes on the human figure mean that it is "got up" or painted for the corroboree. On the other side of the stick, figure 4, there are two groups of crosses, one containing four, the other six, or ten in all, similar to those on the front side. The remainder of the carving on this side consists of a number of devices of the *yammunyamun* pattern, made up of straight lines and curves. The notches<sup>1</sup> and crosses on the stick are merely added for ornament. The wood of which it is made is nunumbeera.

Figures 5 and 6.—This stick was made by Belay and Kunganooy, two brothers, of the Kubbi class and Iguana totem, both of whom are chief men of the Tinanburra tribe, and was dispatched to Nanee, Kumbo Kangaroo, one of the head-men of the Culgoa tribe, residing at Goodooga. The makers of the stick gave it, together with a verbal message, to a black fellow whose name I did not learn, who brought it from Tinanburra to Toulby, a distance of about 60 miles, where he handed it over to Kubbi Iguana, a man of the Culgoa tribe. Kubbi brought it to Tatalla, on the Culgoa river, about ten miles from Toulby, where he met "George," a half-caste, a Kubbi Padamelon, who is a "tracker" attached to the Goodooga police station and who was then at Tatalla on official duty. Kubbi handed the stick to George, who

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<sup>1</sup> Having heard white men say that these notches indicate a certain number of blacks, I asked Mr J. E. Miller, the police officer at Goodooga, New South Wales, to make the fullest inquiries he could from the various tribes in his district. He writes: "As requested by you, I have made strict and careful inquiries in reference to the 'nicks' on the edges of the message-sticks, and as far as I can learn, they do not mean anything. All the blacks in this district say the 'nicks' have no meaning, but are merely put on the sticks to ornament them, or, to use their own words, 'to make them look pretty.'"

brought it to Goodooga and gave it to Nanee, the man to whom it was sent, with the verbal message he had received from Kubbi. The message was to the effect that Belay and Kunganooay requested Nanee and his two brothers, Bindi and Bunjalah, to come to Tinanburra for the purpose of joining them in a big corroboree, which was shortly to be held there. Tinanburra is on the Cuttaburra river, in Queensland, and Goodooga is on the Bokhara river, in New South Wales, the distance between the two places being about 100 miles.

The two heads alongside of each other in the middle of the stick, figure 5, are the two brothers sending the message, and the single head at each end of the stick are the two brothers of Nanee, to whom the message was sent. There are 76 notches or nicks altogether, 42 of them being on one edge; on the other edge there are 18 notches, and then a smooth space of about an inch and a quarter, after which there are 16 more notches. These notches are added merely for ornamentation. The remaining marks on the flat surface, and also all the marks on the other side of the stick, figure 6, consisting of V-shaped lines, triangles, and quadrilaterals of the *yammunyamun*<sup>1</sup> pattern are for ornamental purposes only. Bunches of the white down of birds were fastened on the ends of the stick, being tied to it by means of string attached to the notched projections at each end. These decorations are not shown in my drawing.

This stick is eight inches and one-tenth in length, an inch and one-tenth across at the widest part, and a quarter of an inch thick. It is thicker in the middle than at the edges.

Figure 7.—This is a message stick or token sent by a man of the Clark River tribe to one of the blacks at the Basalt river, Queensland. The messenger who brought it said it was a reminder to the Bluff Downs natives to bring plenty of handkerchiefs and other fancy things when they next visited the first-mentioned tribe. The length of the stick is five inches and three-eighths and its diameter half an inch. It is simply a round piece of wood, without any paint upon it, marked all over in a somewhat similar manner to figure 12.

Figures 8 and 9.—This drawing represents both sides of a message-stick made at Coomburrah by a native named Taballah,

<sup>1</sup> This is a Kamilaroi and Wiradjuri word used to designate certain devices cut upon the ground or upon trees. Journ. Anthropol. Inst., London, xxv, 302; 323.

Murri Iguana, one of the head-men of the Cudnappa River tribe, who handed it to a black fellow named Kunbitalah, Murri Iguana, one of the Culgoa River tribe, who was at Coomburrah visiting the blacks there. Kunbitalah conveyed the stick to Angledool, and delivered it, with the oral message, to Enutbeakah, Kubbi Iguana, one of the head-men of the Currawillinghi tribe. Coomburrah is about 80 miles from Angledool.

This stick is made of what the natives call nunumbeera wood and is painted red. Its length is 8 inches and three-quarters, its greatest breadth an inch and fifteen-sixteenths, and its thickness three-eighths of an inch. The holes in the ends are for the purpose of attaching feathers or hair, not shown in the drawing. The notches on its edges have no meaning, but are merely ornamental; (*a*) represents Taballah, and the figure immediately alongside represents his wife. The two figures (*b*) (*b*) on the other end of the stick represent two black fellows of the Cudnappa tribe. On the other side of the stick, figure 9, the figure (*c*) represents Enutbeakah, and the other figures (*d*) on the same side represent the blacks of the Currawillinghi tribe. On looking at the stick, assisted by the verbal message, Enutbeakah understood that Taballah was bringing his gin and two other blacks with him, and by the figures on the other side of the stick Enutbeakah saw that he was requested to bring the blacks of his tribe, the Currawillinghi, with him.

Kunbitalah conveyed the stick from Coomburrah to Angledool, but this was not absolutely necessary; he could have handed it over to another black fellow at Goodooga or elsewhere on the route, but if he had done so it would have been requisite to have given him also the verbal message to be delivered with it. Coomburrah is on the Mungalalah river, Queensland, portion of the *taurai* of the Cudnappa tribe; Angledool, on the Narran river, New South Wales, is portion of the *taurai* of the Currawillinghi tribe.

Figures 10 and 11.—These drawings represent both sides of a stick sent by Nanee (*a*), one of the head-men of the Culgoa tribe, to Boomee, Murri Opossum (*b*), one of the head-men of the Cuttaburra tribe. It was dispatched from Goodooga, on the Bokhara river, to Brewarra, on the Cuttaburra river, both places being in New South Wales. Kubbi (*c*), one of the head-men of the Culgoa tribe, carried it from Goodooga to Tatalla, on the Cul-

goa river, where he handed it over to Noondooayah, Murri Opossum (*d*), one of the Cuttaburra tribe, but not a head-man, who was then at Tatalla on a visit to the Culgoa tribe. Noondooayah then carried the stick from Tatalla to Brewarra and handed it to Boomee, with the following oral message: "Nanee asks Boomee to muster his tribe and bring them to Tatalla, on the Culgoa river, to hold a big corroboree." (*e*) is the road the Cuttaburra blacks will travel to Tatalla; (*f*) is the track the Culgoa blacks will use in going to the same place; (*g*) is the track to the corroboree ground; if the Cuttaburra tribe arrive at Tatalla after the Culgoa tribe, they will see by the footmarks of the latter where to turn off the road and will follow the tracks to the corroboree ground; (*h*) is the camp of the Cuttaburra tribe, with Boomee standing beside it; (*i*) is the camp of the Culgoa tribe, alongside of which Nanee is standing, and (*j*) is the corroboree ground, with the track leading to it from the main road.

The stick is made of midjerie wood and is five inches and five-eighths long, two inches and one-sixteenth broad, and three-sixteenths of an inch thick. The human figures carved on this message-stick are better executed than the drawing on any of the other sticks illustrated in this plate. An attempt has been made to represent the hair; the fingers are drawn on both hands of the figure marked (*a*), and on one hand of each of the other human figures (*b*), (*c*), (*d*); the features are delineated in them all. The two larger dots in each face represent the eyes; the two smaller dots below them are intended for the nostrils, and below these again is a mark for the mouth.

Figure 12.—The message-stick here represented is a round piece of wood, a little over half an inch in diameter and six inches long, and is painted red. It was sent by one of the blacks on the Clark river, Queensland, to a black fellow known as "Billy," residing at Bluff Downs station, on the Basalt river, asking him and his people to come to the Ana Branch, as a big corroboree was coming off. The localities mentioned are in the North Kennedy district, Queensland.

I have shown the marking on one-third of the circumference, the remainder being marked in the same way. The markings consist of V-shaped or zigzag lines, cut with tolerable regularity and sameness throughout the whole length of the stick.

FORMATION OF A RACE POSSESSING IMMUNITY TO TUBERCULOSIS.—A memoir has recently been presented by MM. Dubonsquet-Labordarie and Duchesne to the Academy of Medicine at Paris concerning a group of families at Saint Ouen that appear for many generations to have been immune from tuberculosis. These families are 98 in number and compose 511 persons. Records since 1870 show that no cases of tuberculosis have occurred in them since that date, and old men state that they have never seen or heard of any cases of such lung troubles among them. They are farming people of excellent sanitary habits, and rarely or never mix either socially or by marriage with immigrants from other sections of the country. Their children are almost invariably nursed at the breast. The annual death-rate from tuberculosis in France is 3 per 1,000; in the army 11 per 1,000. The effect of heredity and of hygienic conditions is therefore strikingly shown in this selected group.

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ARROW-POISON IN AFRICA.—An English review of chemistry and pharmacy states that the poison used by the Bushmen near the Kalahari desert is obtained by crushing an insect of the genus *Diamphidia*. The active principle was found to be a toxalbumin that acts on the red corpuscles of the blood, causing a dissolution of the hemoglobine. This results in symptoms of paralysis, followed by death. Boiling destroys the effect of the poison.

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A COUNTRY WITHOUT DOMESTIC ANIMALS.—Such, according to a Russian journal, is Japan. As the Japanese eat no meat and drink no milk, they have no use for the cow. As they do not ride and use men as draft animals, they need no horses, mules, nor donkeys. There are many dogs in the country, but in a wild condition. They raise no sheep, goats, nor pigs, wool being replaced by silk in their manufactures. Hens, ducks, and pigeons are rarely seen, being usually kept only for foreign consumption. The bulls kept near Yedo are for ceremonial use only, being destined to drag the funeral car of the members of the family of the Mikado. It would be an interesting ethnological study to determine what effect this absence of animals has had upon the development and culture of this remarkable people, who show in all their art such an extraordinary sympathy with natural objects.