

THE MURNGIN: AN EXAMPLE OF HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

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Abstract

The Murngin are only one of several small and scattered nomadic hunting and food gathering tribes of Australia. They wander over the low alkaline plain of northeast Arnhem Land, located between the Gulf of Carpentaria and the Timor Sea. This tropical location, which brings the region under the influence of the alternating rainy doldrums and dry trades, limits the number of people who may inhabit the land, and sets limits to the activities of the inhabitants. Fortified by mangrove jungle isolation along the better watered portions of the flat coastal region and tidal rivers the tribe has long been preserved from invasion in that direction. On the south the burning sands of the Great Australian Desert closed the door to destructive inroads on their civilization. Thus in this remote refuge the geographical factor of isolation made it possible for these primitive people to live happily within the resources of the region, and to preserve intact the customs and beliefs which were common to the whole human race in its infancy.

Influence of Water.—Tribal life is focused around one or more water holes which may be an ordinary small lake or pool, a river or a creek flowing through the domain of the clan, a spring, a native well or water hole; and in a few cases it may be the ocean itself.¹ Small wonder that with food and drink of life dependent on the water holes, and possible death resulting from floods, the native has chosen water as the chief symbol of the clan's spiritual life.

The seasonal fluctuation of plenty or scarcity of rainfall regulates the member-

ship and size of the economic groups. In the early part of the dry season when food is plentiful friendly clans may live together in groups containing as many as thirty or forty people. But what might have been a community relapses into family groups as the drought drags on for five or six months. Likewise in the rainy months when food is secured with difficulty, the group is small.

Vegetation and Animals.—The plants that flourish in this tropical region with alternating wet and dry seasons are limited in variety. Cycad palm nuts, Pandanus fruit, the glutinous substance from the trunks of small cabbage palms, spear grass, lily roots and yams make up the chief vegetable diet of the people. Every kind of tree found in the environment is used for some purpose.

Hunters they were and hunters they have remained. Roaming of course, is necessary, since the natives cannot depend on a regular food supply. The lack of domesticated animals cannot be fairly charged against the Murngin. With nothing higher than a marsupial to work with the scope was limited. One could hardly expect them to accomplish much with a kangaroo or a duck-billed platypus. Nature is prodigal as regards varieties of fish, birds and other animals which furnish the natives with food and material for adornment. Oysters and other varieties of bivalves are gathered by the women; and turtles, sharks and crocodiles are harpooned by the men. Snakes, iguana and grubs are also common articles of food.

¹ Warner, W. L., *A Black Civilization*, p. 20.

Soil and Mineral Influences.—Except as the soil affects the natural vegetation and the vegetation in turn determines the food supply, it can be said that soils influence the people very little.

Rocks and minerals, on the other hand, play a significant part in the culture of the Murngin. Every native knows for what this or that stone is used. Smooth river stones are gathered for ax heads, and small stones are used to break mussel shells and to grind nuts or seeds. "Rock ledges forming caves are sometimes utilized as shelter during the rainy season. Rock basins which catch rain water are used as types of primitive cisterns to supply water in the absence of wells and fresh-water courses."²

Deposits of red and yellow ochre are used in making body paints, in painting totemic emblems, and in working out designs on carrying baskets, forehead bands, etc.

Shelter.—People who must adjust their lives to a shifting food supply must construct a shelter that can readily be built with each new change of location. Furthermore, the dwellings must have a periodical alternation of type due to marked seasonal change of wind and precipitation.

During a good part of the dry season, the only shelter is some tree underneath which a semi-circle of ground has been smoothed and outlined by a border of sand and perhaps a series of strips of paper bark. Another type of dry season shelter is a lean-to or windbreak three or four feet high, made by placing brush against sticks pushed into the ground.

The wet season house calls for an adjustment to fifty to sixty inches of rain during a three or four month period. It is a small, dome-shaped house made by placing layers of bark over a framework of sticks and pandanus leaves. The stone cave dwelling is used by some clans in the north during the wet season. It is interesting to note that clans living near mosquito infested swamps build their houses on poles about eight feet above the ground.

Clothing.—For the Murngin there are no changing fashions. If one excepts the carrying bags, hair belts, necklaces, and public-aprons made of opossum fur string as articles of ornamentation or for ritual

purposes, it may be said that the Murngin have neither invented clothing nor borrowed it from others.

Weapons and Utensils.—Stones, shells, wood, bark, resin, grass, leaves, and bones of animals—all of these are formed into weapons and utensils by which the native adapts himself to his natural environment. While the use of the bow and arrow does not seem to have occurred to him, the spear and ax are in general use. Clubs and boomerangs used for striking blows are commonly made of ironwood or the curved roots of the mangrove. Roots, yams, grubs and small lizards are dug with a digging stick made by sharpening both ends of an ironwood stick about four or five feet long.

String, basic to most of the articles worn and carried, is made of the inner bark of certain trees (the hibiscus in particular), roots of trees, human hair and opossum fur. Fiber bags woven to transport lily bulbs, cycad nuts, yams, and other foods are important utensils of both the men and the women.

Tools for catching sea food include turtle harpoons, harpoon rope, fish nets and fish traps. People in the interior do not possess boats of any description but use a specially constructed bark bundle as a raft to cross streams. Coastal people, on the other hand, make canoes from certain types of fig and eucalyptus trees whose centers have been eaten out by termites.

Art.—The art of the Murngin is conditioned by the natural environment, the most familiar objects occurring with greatest frequency. As one might expect figures representing animals such as the snake, kangaroo, and fish bulk large in the art motifs of their crude rock drawings and eucalyptus bark paintings. Art also finds expression in the human hair belts decorated with parrot feathers spear grass armlets, wristlets and anklets totemic emblems of various kinds, feather headdresses, and forehead bands for men made of fiber string covered with white clay or red ochre.

Myths and Rituals.—Many of the myths and rituals symbolize the cycle of rain and dry seasons with the accompanying phenomena of greater and less heat, changing winds and sky conditions, growth and decay of vegetation, and the

² Warner, W. L., *A Black Civilization*, p. 152.

appearance of certain animals and the disappearance of others. This is not surprising when one considers the need of change in the adaptation of Murngin life to fit the changing seasons.

Rhythmic dance movements interpret the rise and fall of flood waters, the flow and ebb of the tide, the wash of the waves covering the sand beaches, the stir of water when the waves break, and others equally meaningful.

Although the natives do have a profound belief in magic, they have a fairly wide knowledge of both plant and animal remedies for curing illnesses. Infusion of broken-up leaves of paper-bark tree is the remedy for sore throat; the bark of the plum tree is heated and placed over

the aching tooth or against the aching ear; infusions of the leaves of certain trees are used to treat headache; and the inner bark of a certain variety of eucalyptus tree is chewed and swallowed to relieve chest cold.³

Thus we have glimpsed the life of a simple people, a self-contained, a self-sustaining people; a people whose culture is crystallized by the geographical factor of isolation, and whose needs and tastes are satisfied by a physical environment which is both limiting and stimulating. It is to be hoped that the Australian government, which has already reserved Arnhem Land for its natives, will give adequate patrol to this fast dying race, remnants worthy of sympathetic effort to save as a unique link with the past.

³ Warner, W. L., *A Black Civilization*, p. 221.