

NATIVE HUTS AND SHELTERS

Also, the manufacture of kangaroo skin
cloaks.

For additional notes on Shelters,
Encampment and Domestic life, see
collection in MSS of notes from
various early writers on the subject.

NATIVE HUTS AND SHELTERS

The temporary nature of native huts and shelters has not varied in the centuries that have passed since the first white man observed and recorded them, and it may be safely assumed that in this, as in other respects, the natives have followed the same customs, without any change for many, many years. The description given by Dampier and others in the 17th Century is applicable to the 20th.

Tasman, who visited the Nor'West coast in 1644 noticed that the inhabitants "used no houses".

Dampier in 1688 saw that their dwellings were "a few boughs stuck up to keep the wind from them."

Vancouver, notwithstanding that his sketch of the huts found at King George's Sound, showed them surrounded by a beautiful park-like demesne, thought that they were "the most miserable habitations". "The shape of the dwelling," he writes (Voyages, Vol. I, p. 33) "was that of a beehive vertically divided into two equal parts . . . in height about three feet, and in diameter about four feet and a half; it was however constructed with some degree of uniformity, with slight twigs . . . the horizontal and vertical twigs formed intervals from four to six inches square, and the latter, sticking a few inches into the earth, were its security, and fixed it to the ground. This kind of basket hut was covered with the bark of trees and small green boughs. Just within its front, which was open the whole of its diameter, a fire had been made."

Captain King in 1810 describes the huts seen at Long Island, Northern Australia, "They were of a conical shape and not more than three feet high, built of sticks stuck in the ground, and being united at the top supported a roof of bark, which was again covered with sand, so that the hut looked more like a sand hillock than the abode of a human creature. The opening was at one side and about eighteen inches in diameter."

The only attempt at a stone building was seen by King in the vicinity of Careening Bay where his party came upon a

small village containing several huts, no two of which were built alike. One of these is thus described, "Two walls of stones, piled one upon the other to the height of three feet, formed the two ends; saplings were also laid down to support a covering of bark or dried grass; the front, which faced the east, was not closed, but the back which slanted from the roof to the ground, appeared to have been covered with bark, like the roof."

In the neighbourhood of Hanover Bay, Grey found that the natives used only bark beds placed under the shelter of the trees, and at Prince Regent River he came upon a large encampment in which however, there were no huts. "An extensive circle was formed by laying large flat stones upon the ground and on each of these a smaller one . . . Near some of the stones were laid large shells . . . and in the centre of the circle were the marks of frequent fires." (Grey's Journal, Vol. I, p. 104)

Near the Glenelg River, Grey came upon a place where twelve bark beds had been left in a circle round a fire, the place showing the appearance of having been used for some time by the natives as a camping place. (It is probable that these bark beds were used during certain phases in the initiation of the young men.)

The native men of the Northwest and Northern Kimberleys generally sleep singly, differing in this respect from the southern men who will often sleep four or five in one hut.

At Prince Regent River, Grey found a hut with a sloping roof, the first of its kind he had ever seen.

The huts seen by Grey on the Gascoyne were much higher and altogether of a superior description to those of the Southwest, being built of large sized logs. The Southern native, Kaiber, who accompanied Grey, became frightened at the size of these huts, and proposed that the party should go no further, as, he said, "the natives must be very large men from their having such large huts."

Near the estuary of the Hutt River, Grey passed two native villages, the huts differing from those in the Southern districts in being much larger, more strongly built, and very nicely plastered over the outside with clay and clods of turf. Besides

these huts there were well marked roads, deeply sunk wells, and extensive warrain grounds, which all spoke of a large and, comparatively speaking, resident population. (The abundance of the warrain roots in that district would ensure an annual visit to such a prolific spot.)

At Bowes, Grey came upon another favourite camping place of the natives, the huts being as numerous and as well made as those at the Hutt River, and at Greenough there was an assemblage of huts which collectively would have held about a hundred and fifty natives. All these districts must have been very frequently visited by the natives of the surrounding areas, for barter, food and initiation purposes. It is however unusual for natives to return to the same hut, as a fresh one can be erected in a very short time, and will be more comfortable from the native point of view than an old one.

In making a hut, the native women placed two forked saplings together which formed a triangle with the ground. The saplings leaned a little way from the weather side, and were supported by a third sapling. The apex of this triangle might be three, four or five feet from the ground, and on it two longer saplings were placed slantingly against the wind. Over these saplings, bushes or bark were placed in such fashion as to form a rain proof roof. The bark or bushes might be supplemented by grass or spinifex.

An encampment rarely consists of more than seven or eight huts, for, except during special initiation ceremonies, and other times when large parties assemble, the numbers are generally small, as food becomes a matter of daily providing, and large parties or camps would find more difficulty in procuring their daily supply, than the smaller groups. All huts are arranged so as not to overlook each other. The young bachelors of the camp have a place to themselves, the children and young unmarried girls sleeping with the married women.

The northern tribes and also those of the interior are more nomadic in their habits than those of the southern districts, which is entirely due to the greater struggle for food in the inland areas. More often than not, therefore, the

the sleeping places of the inland people will be the bare ground without any shelter except the small fire which they light beside them at night. A native will always lie down naked no matter what clothing he may have worn during the day.

The northern river natives will not infrequently form their camps in the bed of the river, making hollows in the soft river sand to sleep in. Not infrequently an unusual downpour of rain has fallen, and, causing a sudden rise in the river, sweeps away everything before it. Some years ago, such a sudden rise occurred in the Shaw River, annihilating a whole camp of natives, who had made their temporary homes in its bed. I have walked along the bed of this river in the dry season and have seen the flood marks 60 feet above the spot whereon I stood.

On the De Grey River a similar rise drowned a number of natives who had foolishly settled in its bed during an unusually dry season, yet notwithstanding this, the river beds were again occupied as soon as the waters had left the river.

To make a kangaroo skin cloak, seven kangaroo skins were first collected. They were skinned with a dabba held in the right hand. After they were taken off, they were at once pegged out, either on a tree or on the ground, the women doing this part of the work. When dry, the skins were scraped with a kangaroo bone until they became pliable, when they were rubbed with fat. When they had been rubbed and scraped to the desired softness, they were sewn together with a kangaroo bone needle or awl, the sinews of the same animal forming the thread. The father or mother performed the sewing. The cloak was then ready for wear. It was fastened on the right shoulder, and left the arm free to carry weapons etc. Sometimes the skin was wilgee'd, but it was not otherwise decorated. It was worn with the fur inwards or outwards, as the wearer felt disposed.

Throughout the West, groups or tribes upon whose grounds grew certain woods suitable for wooden weapons, certain grasses for fibre string, hornblende or other flints, etc. etc., districts where kangaroo were plentiful, perfected themselves in the course of ages in the manufacture of shields, kailees, stone axes, kangaroo skin cloaks, so that the products of these districts obtained a certain notoriety for their superiority, and their owners or makers could always obtain a satisfactory exchange of other goods for them.

HUTS, MYAS, etc.

The huts proper (minda) are only made in heavy winter weather. These huts are built in a semicircular shape with strong sticks, about 2 inches in diameter, about 5 feet in length, whose tops are all made to meet. On the outside of these, a sort of thatch is made of boughs and grass. A trench is dug round the mindas and the clay from the trench is thrown on top of the grass and plastered down upon it forming a kind of plaster thatch. These huts are very warm in winter, being entirely draught-proof. In these huts the natives sleep with their feet towards the wide entrance. If a man and woman are sleeping in the hut, a small fire is lighted beside each and another at the entrance. The native always lights a very small fire, as a large one throws out too much heat. On the fire at the entrance the end of a large log is put, and should the smaller fires go out at night, the woman rises, breaks off the cinders from the log which keeps alight and replenishes her own and her husband's fires with them.

These huts are occasionally used during the summer thunderstorms by the natives. Huts built in this fashion generally last about three or four years. If a native dies in his hut at winter time the whole camp leaves at once. At the end of a year they will perhaps return and take possession of the huts with the exception of the one in which the native dies. Cornally saw the skeleton of much larger huts capable of holding ten or twelve natives. The natives were very numerous on the Gascoyne about 30 years ago, but the measles killed off great numbers of them and civilisation did the rest.

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Their summer residences are called yoorloo. These are merely breakwinds of boughs and grass. Cornally says that it is usual in the Gascoyne for a Nor'East hot wind to set in about daybreak. At noon this wind stops and a "southerly buster" takes its place, lasting until sunset. On some days the Nor'easter will immediately blow again after the Southerly buster, but it usually comes up a

little before daylight.

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Inside these yoorloos the natives make a kind of hollow, digging the ground out with their yandees, thaggas or miggas (all names given to the wooden vessel which is the vade mecum of the women). Sometimes this hollow is over a foot in depth and shaped somewhat like a large yandee, scooped out more in the centre than at the ends. It is made to fit the number in family. The inside of the minda is made in the same manner. The women use the yandees for digging out the holes. If the earth at the bottom is hard and lumpy the women dig at it with their wannas to loosen it and then flatten it out and smooth it with the bottom of the yandee. Page 188

The huts are sometimes arranged in a semicircle, and sometimes in a straight row, occasionally they will be scattered without any method. Generally a sandy place is chosen for a camp. As all are relatives there is no particular placing of certain groups in the camp, each family choosing its own spot; sometimes a distant reserved or sulky member of the tribe will build his hut right away from the rest of the camp.

In the large camps of corroborees the visitors make their camps at the point of the compass from which they come, the men issuing the invitation camp in the centre, the old man and his family being right in the middle with all his relatives in various distances round him.