

FOOD.

As a rule the food of these aborigines consists of fish principally, of which, for eight months in the year they have a superabundance; so much so indeed is their supply during those months they cannot nearly consume it all, consequently quite a moiety is absolutely wasted. To supplement the fish they have kangaroo, emu, opossum, and wallaby; and besides these, aquatic wild-fowl of countless variety are found in the greatest profusion on the lakes and lagoons; these latter they capture abundantly, aided by nets manufactured for that purpose only; and during the breeding season of these birds they get eggs innumerable, the canoes arriving at the camps in the evenings then are literally laden down to the water's edge with no other cargo but eggs; they are heaped up at both ends until there is hardly room for the native to stand and paddle. It is of but small moment to them whether the eggs have birds in them or not, as they are consumed with a relish all the same. A species of flag having a farinaceous root, called by the aborigines *kumpung*, grows very plentifully by the margins of all the lakes and lagoons; it makes, even to a European, a very palatable and nutritious food; it can be procured in abundance, but as it requires considerable labour to dig it, much less is procured than its manifold merits would justify. The flower-stem of this flag when it rises through the water in spring is also eaten in its raw green state; it is very insipid to European palates, and I fancy it contains but a very small modicum of nutritive matter; however the natives are extremely partial to it, they therefore consume it in great quantities. In this green stage the aborigines term it *jontie*. The common small-flowered yellow water lily which so plentifully fringes most of the colonial lakes and lagoons, is another source from whence they derive a desirable addition to their diet. The roots of this plant are formed of many tubers, averaging about an inch in length, by a diameter of about half an inch; the roots of one plant will frequently yield as many tubers as a half-pint measure will contain. They are baked before being eaten, and are of a sweet mawkish taste, and not unlike Jerusalem artichokes in their consistency. These tubers are called *laboor* by the aborigines.

The common sow thistle, dandelion, yam, and a trefoil which grows on country subject at times to inundations during their respective seasons are largely consumed. To see the *lyoors* (women) approaching the camp in the evenings with each a great bundle of these forage plants on her head, a stranger to their customs would imagine that they were providing the nightly fodder for a dairy of cows; they eat all these herbs in their raw state by way of salad.

Besides the foregoing they eat the larvæ of several kinds of ants, some of which are tree-inhabiting, whilst others are mound-raising ground insects. Grubs also of all kinds and sizes are greatly appreciated by them, more especially the large one common to the

gum-trees all over the Colony. The natives are very expert in discovering the shrubs and trees in which grubs are to be found, in fact they seldom err; yet to a casual observer, or even one with some acuteness, there is not the slightest perceptible difference in the appearance of a tree or shrub containing numerous grubs and those which do not contain any, but aboriginal observation is wonderfully keen in all matters pertaining to nature; even objects seemingly the most trivial fail to elude their ever ready perception. The ant larvæ is consumed raw, whilst the grubs are eaten either raw or roasted.

During the cold bleak weather which occurs in winter they are not the least bit choice as to their food; anything having life, no matter how repulsive to European notions it may be, is most acceptable at those times; frogs are deemed good; the then hybernating carpet or true snake most toothsome, and even the abominable fetid wild dog is esteemed a luxury of the very highest order.

Blackfellows' ovens or cooking-places have been a fertile source of argument for many years, some holding that they are not cooking-places at all, but tumuli or burrows left by some race long since passed away and quite forgotten. Still, so far as the general public are aware, none of the writers or discussers of the point have had sufficient curiosity to dig into the mounds, and so set the vexed question at rest once and for all.

Blackfellows' ovens are not by any means misnomers, as to all intents and purposes they are essentially genuine cooking-places, or cooking-places and kitchen middens combined, and the following is the manner of their formation:—A family, or perhaps several families, as the case may be, select a site for their camp, where abundance of game and other sources of food obtain and are procurable with the least expenditure of time and labour. Towards the middle of the afternoon the hunters drop into camp, with the result of the day's industry, consisting in all probability of all sorts and sizes; for my present purpose however I shall assume the game to consist of opossums only.

When the hunters have seated themselves comfortably, they set to work at once skinning the opossums, whilst several of the *lyoors* (women) go off with their yam-sticks; when they reach the spot selected for the purpose, they begin with a will to excavate a hole, about 3 feet in diameter and nearly 2 feet deep; during the digging of the hole any pieces of clay which they chip out, in size similar to ordinary road metal, are placed carefully on one side with the view to their future use.

When the hole has been dug sufficiently deep, it is swept or brushed out with some boughs or a bunch of grass; it is then filled to the top or a little above it with firewood, which the *lyoors* had previously collected and prepared for that purpose. On the top of the firewood the selected pieces of clay are carefully placed, the

wood is then ignited, and by the time it is all burned the clay nodules have become baked until they are exactly similar to irregular sections of well burnt brick ; of course they are red hot. When this result has been properly achieved, the hot clay is removed from the hole ; for this purpose they use two pieces of stick about 8 inches long, holding them both in one hand and working them deftly, even as a cookmaid uses a pair of tongs. The aborigines have not any distinctive name for these pieces of stick, merely calling them *kulkie* (wood).

The deft manipulation of these tongs is an accomplishment enjoyed by old and young alike ; their dexterity therein seems quite an aboriginal gift, as few white men ever attain to any degree of proficiency in their use.

After the hot clay is removed from the hole the ashes are carefully swept out, and a thinnish layer of slightly moistened grass is placed over the bottom and round the sides, upon which the prepared opossums are nicely packed and covered over with more damp grass ; the hot clay nodules are then spread evenly over the top of the grass, and over these the finer earth which originally came out of the excavation is spread.

Should this final covering be too thin to keep in the steam, it is supplemented by earth dug in immediate proximity (this supplemented soil fully accounts for the depressions always found about the bases of these ovens); ashes are never employed for the outside covering, nor is sand, because being so fine they would be apt to percolate through the interstices of both grass and clay nodules, thereby adding an amount of grit, which would not improve either the flavour or appearance of the food. Before the heat in the clay nodules and the hole itself has become exhausted the opossums are beautifully cooked, as perfectly so indeed as though the operation had been performed in the most perfect kitchen range extant.

When the cooking has been completed, the covering is scraped off, and this debris, consisting of calcined clay, ashes, and burnt earth, becomes the nucleus of a blackfellow's oven, such as are to be seen at the present day. This process being repeated at short intervals, over a series of years, perhaps indeed for centuries, results in the mounds which are in reality blacks' ovens.

As long as the camp remains in the same position the original hole is used for baking ; and when it is understood that at least a barrowful of fresh clay is required every time the oven is heated, to replace the unavoidable waste by crumbling, which is by no means inconsiderable, in consequence of the clay being used in an unwrought state, it will readily be seen how these mounds gradually but surely increase ; bones too of the animals they use as food, charcoal, &c., tend materially to hasten this growth.

isolated spots, when there chances to be but a small section of a tribe located thereon, and as grave-digging is very arduous when hands are few and the implements merely yam-sticks, the easiest method, therefore, of covering up the dead from their sight is at once adopted, and that is simply enough done by scraping a hole in the friable soil of the mound, wherein the defunct is placed and covered up. Immediately after one of these hurried burials the mound is vacated, and ere much time has passed the defunct subject is entirely forgotten. Be it understood, however, that this description of sepulture is only given to old worn-out women or invalids of long standing, and who had become troublesome and tiresome to their unwilling attendants.

I once had occasion to remove the whole of a blackfellow's oven ; it was a fair-sized one, and contained quite 3,000 cubic yards of soil ; during its removal twenty-eight skeletons were exhumed. This large number was a matter of considerable surprise to me, but on making due inquiry amongst the very old aborigines—the young people of the tribe did not know anything about them—I discovered that they were the remains of some of the small-pox victims who died during the earlier stages of the epidemic, whilst sepulture was yet being given to those who succumbed to the loathsome plague.

CANOES.

The aborigines make their *unkooies* (canoes) from the bark of the red gum tree ; bark of other trees, notably box, is also used, but merely for temporary purposes, as no other bark but the former will stand the weather without curling up and splitting. In all cases each canoe is made from a single sheet of bark without tie or join. In making these vessels, trees with natural curves are chosen, as canoes so obtained precludes the necessity of using fire to soften the bark with the view to giving the required rise stem and stern.

When the bark for a canoe is cut, stretchers are immediately placed across it at intervals of 3 feet ; this is done to prevent the bark from curling whilst the sap is in it ; short props are also placed under the stem and stern to keep them from becoming too much depressed by reason of their own weight. If at this stage the canoe should not have the exact shape desired by the maker, he places heavy billets of wood inside at those parts which require pressing outwards, and the bark being full of sap the pressure effects the end aimed at. After this, and whilst the weights are still in the canoe and the props still in position outside, a coat of well puddled clay is plastered all over the interior, which effectually hinders sun-cracks ; in this condition the canoe is left in the sun to season. After ten or fifteen days' exposure the bark has become so hard that it is able to retain the shape ever after, no matter how

roughly it may be handled. It is therefore launched without the slightest ceremony upon the waters where it is destined to float for the few brief years of its existence.

After the lapse of two years or a little more the canoe becomes heavy and sodden, therefore correspondingly unwieldy, so the owner in his many rambles keeps his eyes about him with the view of discovering a suitable tree from which he can take a canoe wherewith to replace his now frail craft.

According to the size of the canoe required, so is the tree selected from which to take the bark. Heads of families generally have vessels large enough to move their whole households at once from place to place; bachelors however, having less impedimenta, usually content themselves with canoes of much less capacity, finding such more suited for pursuing aquatic birds during the moulting season, thousands of which they capture in their then most helpless condition; in harpooning fish too, the small canoe is found most manageable. The aborigines of this lacustrine and riverine area hold their canoes in higher estimation than they do any other of their possessions, but this is only a matter of course, for without these vessels their food would be very much more scanty than it is, and of a much poorer quality; besides, in the flood-time they would be unable to get about by reason of the many waters.

The stick for propelling (it can hardly be termed a paddle) is about 12 feet long, and 2 inches and a half in diameter; it is round; at one end it has three grains affixed, the centre one being half an inch shorter than the outer ones; the latter have a barb each just above the points, the centre one is smooth; the outer grains are made of wood hardened by fire, the centre one being of kangaroo bone; the pole is made of pine; the aboriginal name for the implement is *maroong*, that being the native name for pine tree. This instrument has a twofold use, that of propelling the canoe being one, and transfixing fish with the grains being the other.

When bent upon harpooning fish with this grained canoe stick, they select a stretch of shallow water, full of reeds and other aquatic vegetation, over which the wary fisherman quietly propels his canoe, using the plain end of the stick for the purpose; every now and then he jobs the stick sharply to the bottom in front of the canoe, thereby disturbing the feeding fish; as a matter of course they rush away from the neighbourhood of the disturbance, shaking the plants in their hurry; the movement of the plants above the water show the keen-eyed fisherman at once the position of his prey. After the plants have ceased shaking the wily savage pushes his canoe up gently to within striking distance of the plants which he saw last in motion, knowing quite well that at the foot thereof his game is resting; poising his grained weapon for but a short space, he launches it with wonderful precision, and seldom fails to bring his scaly victim quivering and glittering into the upper air.

When sailing over deep water both ends of the stick are used; it is held by the middle at those times, and each end is dipped into the water alternately; they are wonderfully expert in the management of their canoes, driving them along with amazing velocity, and a directness of bearing truly splendid.

FIBRE PLANTS AND THEIR MANIPULATION.

Of fibre plants there are three which the aborigines utilise in the manufacture of twine and cord. The *Kampung* (*Typha mul-lora*) root furnishes the fibre most commonly employed in making the thread which is used for netting browbands, waistbelts, and bags of all sorts and sizes. The largest *mokoor mokoors* (bags) are used for transporting their multifarious belongings from one camp to another, whilst the smaller ones take the place of the pockets of civilization. Each male is provided with one of the latter, which is carried over the point of the shoulder or round the neck, as the fancy of the wearer inclines. This fibre is prepared for use after a very simple though primitive fashion, thus: After the root is baked (it produces food as well as fibre), it is not cut up into short sections for convenience in eating, as doing so would render the material comparatively worthless, by reason of its shortness; therefore each root is taken separately, the skin peeled off, and the remainder, which consists of farina and fibre, is twisted up into a knot, oftentimes as large as a good-sized fist; in this condition it is crammed into the mouths agape for its reception. Sometimes both hands are ludicrously employed in the performance of this feat. When one of these immense mouthfuls has been sufficiently masticated to extract all the farina, the residuum, which is the fibre, is ejected in the shape of a small knot of beautiful whitish tow. These knots of tow are carefully packed away in bags as they are formed, said bags being utilised for pillows until the time comes round for twine-making. When about to make twine, these tow knots are steeped in water for a night, which effectually softens any starchy matter they may contain. They are then teased out and well scraped with mussel shells, until they are perfectly cleansed; the clean flax is then tied up in small neat hanks, ready for the twine-maker's operations.

Considering that these aborigines do not possess any appliances other than those furnished by Dame Nature, it is truly wonderful how deft they are in the fabrication of cord and twine. They make these of sizes varying from those of a thickness equal to our clothes-lines down to the veriest tiny twine. Whatever the size may be, the cord or twine in *all* cases consists of two plies only, and the most singular thing about it is, that both strands or plies are twisted at one time, and as the hand is drawn back from twisting them, the retrograde action twines them together into the

finished cord. The work is done on the bare thigh, thus: Two flat hanks are loosened out, the ends of which are held by the left hand, the rest is laid straight across the thigh and kept apart by one of the fingers of the hand holding the ends; the palm of the right hand is now moistened and placed over the flax on the thigh, when it is rubbed sharply towards the knee. By this action, both of the flax hanks are twisted into firm threads, the finger which had kept the hanks apart is now withdrawn, and the right hand is pulled back with a sharp jerk, which results in the two threads being beautifully twined together into a neat cord. The end of the shortest hank (they always commence with a long and short hank) is now teased out, and the end of another hank is mixed with it, the two rubbing actions being again performed with a like result, so it continues, two rubs and a join alternately.

This process they will continue hour after hour, until the thigh becomes quite painful to the slightest touch; the thread-making is therefore thrown aside until the tender limb returns to its normal condition.

Boongoor, a fibre rush, is another plant from which they procure flax. This plant grows at the bases of sandhills, but not so low down as to impinge on the flooded ground on which the sandhills usually abut, but still near enough thereto to receive the benefit of the water by capillary attraction. As it grows, this rush is a rigid, harsh-looking plant, without the flexibility common to rushes which grow in moist situations.

In preparing fibre from this plant, they cut it as close to the ground as possible, so that the flax may be of a fairish length; it is then tied into bundles 6 inches in diameter, after which it is soaked in water for two days. When the soaking has been properly effected, it is placed in an oven and baked for four hours—it is then in a fit condition for the next process, which is scraping. The scraping is done with the view of removing the husk and pithy matter; the instruments used in this operation are mussel shells. Whilst the scraping is in progress the rushes are continually being dipped into water, the softening properties of which aid materially in the proper cleansing of the flax. When it is quite finished it is laid on the grass to dry, which it soon does, as it is spread out in small parcels, each parcel being merely sufficient to form one of the neat hanks of the correct size required in the manufacture of the cord or twine they may have in view. When dry, it is made up into the hanks and stored away until required. From this fibre, nets and fishing-lines are made, as also nets for taking ducks. It makes a most serviceable thread for either nets or fishing-lines, having the power to resist the rotting influence of water to a very great extent indeed.

The next and last of their cord-making plants is the giant-mallow; the fibre from this plant is of a much coarser texture

than those already described, therefore it is only used for making very thick coarse cord, which is worked up into nets for capturing emus.

The process of separating this fibre from the plant is the same as that adopted in the manipulation of the rush, with this one difference, after the mallow stems are taken out of the oven, they are well bruised with mallets, before they are dipped and scraped.

The emu nets made from this mallow fibre are frequently 150 yards long, the mesh being 6 inches wide. When completed, an emu net looks exactly similar to our sheep nets and quite as strong.

OF NETS :

Their construction, and methods of application. Weirs how contrived, and of what utility.

Duck nets are usually 100 yards long, by 2 yards deep. In making these nets, the aborigines do not use a gauge, as is usual with Europeans—they simply judge of the size by the finger and thumb; the knot however is precisely similar to that made by European net-makers, the meshes are as regular in size as though a gauge had been employed, and the finished net is as uniform throughout its length and quite as strong as those made by men whose sole occupation is that of net-making. Fishing-nets are about the same length usually as those for catching ducks, but they are not so deep, being only 4 feet wide; the mesh is also different, being 3 inches wide, whilst the former is 4 inches. The same sized twine is used for making both nets.

Nets for taking crawfish are only 10 feet long, with a width of 2 yards, the mesh being only a quarter of an inch wide. These crawfish nets are made by the women only, it being deemed beneath the dignity of aboriginal manhood to make nets for catching such insignificant game as *Yappie* (crawfish). The women also net all the bags, waist-belts, brow-bands, &c., no matter whether they are to be worn by the nobler sex or not. The long nets, however, are made entirely by the men, with the exception of the flax preparation, that part of the business being generally performed by the women.

When a duck-trapping expedition has been arranged, all in the camp—men, women, and children—get in motion early in the morning and start off to the lagoon which has been selected for the scene of their operations.

On their arrival at, or rather near the lagoon, the women make a sort of impromptu camp, where they, together with the children

remain, for the twofold purpose of being out of the way, and to make fires at which to cook some of the game they are about to take.

Four of the old men then go off with the net to the point on the lagoon where they purpose fixing it. It is here stretched across, and close enough to the water to hinder the ducks from escaping underneath. In the meantime, the young active men of the tribe range themselves at regular intervals along both sides of the lagoon, high up amongst the branches of the trees with which the margin is fringed, each one having a light disk of bark, 6 or 7 inches in diameter, ready to launch at the birds as required. When they are all properly placed, one who has been sent off for that purpose startles the ducks. As is natural with these birds, the moment they are put to flight, they fly off along the course of the lagoon, following its sinuosities very closely. Should it chance, however, as it frequently does at those times, that the birds wish to leave that lagoon for another in the vicinity, one of the aborigines in the trees nearest to the point from which they wish to break whistles like a hawk, and hurls his disc of bark into the air. The ducks, hearing the whistle, look sharply about, and seeing the whirling disc, fancy it a hawk; consequently a simultaneous stoop is made down close to the surface of the water to escape their fancied enemy; then they continue along the course of the lagoon, the whirling disc and the shrill whistle of the native having materially accelerated their flight. When this panic has subsided and they again begin to soar, another whistle, with the accompaniment of a gyrating disc, soon brings them to the desired level, and thus the sport continues until, after having run this exciting gauntlet, the poor birds find themselves suddenly enveloped in the folds of the treacherous net, when the four guardians thereof, with the assistance of as many hands as can be in at the finish, take but a short space of time to secure the flapping prey, amid an abundance of pleasurable ejaculations and much tongue clucking from the women and children, who gloat over the fat, plump birds as they are drawn from the net. Hundreds and hundreds of ducks are captured in this manner during the months when the waters are confined to the rivers' beds. Of course when all the reedy plains are inundated the ducks have too much scope to be taken so readily; besides, when the waters are out, the ducks are engaged brooding, or in guarding and feeding their young.

The fishing-net is made use of in two ways; the first and common method is what civilised fisherman term hauling. It is conducted in the following fashion:—

A lagoon known to abound in fish, and perhaps not more than waist deep, is chosen as the scene of their operations.

When the aborigines have arrived at the chosen spot, those who are about to work the net tie pieces of calcined clay, weighing

about a pound and a half each, at intervals of 4 feet, all along the bottom line of the net, these pieces of clay having been brought by the women from the nearest cooking mound for that purpose. On the upper line of the net they fix small bundles of reeds at every 6 feet throughout its length; these reed bundles, as a matter of course, act as floats. Thus prepared the net is ready for work. One man now stands on the edge of the lagoon, holding one end of the net, whilst another holding the opposite end in his hand, and the greater bulk of it in his arms as well, stalks very quietly into the water, describing a considerable semicircle in his progress, paying out the net as he goes along. When the net has been nearly all let out, he comes back to the bank from whence he set out, about thirty paces from his companion, then the work of hauling begins in earnest. During this operation, those holding the ends of the nets gradually converge until within 2 yards of each other. Should the haul be a successful one, all the available muscle in the shape of women and even children too is called into requisition, and much clucking of the tongue ensues, as the bellying of the net becomes more and more perceptible, denoting the finny multitude enclosed within its meshes; the hauling and tugging however, goes on all the time, until at last, with one prodigious and final tug, the glittering denizens of the lagoon are triumphantly landed on the grassy margin in one struggling mass of dazzling glitter. On many occasions I have seen three, and four hundred-weight of fish drawn from lagoons at single hauls, consisting of cod, perch, catfish, blackfish, and turtle. It is quite a sight to see them all tumbling and jumping about on the grass, codfish from 50 pounds downwards, and perch, both gold and silver, from 10 pounds down to 2 pounds; the large mesh of the net prevents the landing of small fish, unless on very rare occasions.

When it does happen, however, that some few small fish are landed, the aborigines do not take the trouble to throw them into the water again, and as they disdain to be bothered with small fry in the fish season they are left on the bank for the delectation of crows and gulls.

As soon as the result of a good haul has been examined, the men pick up their spears &c., and stalk off to the camp in a most majestic manner, leaving the women and children to bring on the heavy wet net and the spoil thereof. In due time the women and children straggle into the camp by twos and threes, groaning and whining under their respective burdens.

When a small assemblage, such as two or three families, happen to be encamped in near proximity to a lake, they fix a net in zig-zag lines about 20 yards from the shore, or perhaps a little further out than that should the lake be a shallow one, and from this net daily supplies of fish are drawn, consisting principally of perch and catfish; occasionally a monster codfish is enmeshed, when

of course the net suffers considerably, and in most instances with the loss of the fish. An accident of this kind gives rise to much aboriginal language of, to put it in the mildest form, a demonstrative description, as it entails the labour of taking up the net for repairs, which otherwise would in all probability not be moved for a month or more. Nets so staked are visited morning and evening, and on each occasion from eight to a dozen fish are taken, varying in size from a minimum of 2 up to 10 pounds in weight.

Where the lower rivers run through the reedy country, the banks thereof are 3 or more feet higher than the plains behind them. These elevations look almost like artificial dykes, so perfect are they in their regularity. At irregular intervals all along these dykes, no one of the intervals being greater than a mile and a half, there are openings or creeks, 7 or 8 feet wide, and as deep as the country behind. Through these openings, when the rivers are in flood, the waters rush out, inundating many hundreds of square miles, and this country remains so submerged from August till January.

Whilst the waters thus cover the reedy plains, the various kinds of fish find delectable feeding grounds in the semi-tepid shallows, and the aboriginal fishermen, as a natural consequence, have abundance of sport and profit, too, in pursuing the finny game. Then it is that the canoe and grained paddle are utilised to perfection.