

MAT

Her Story



Searching for the Lost Women of the Two Rivers

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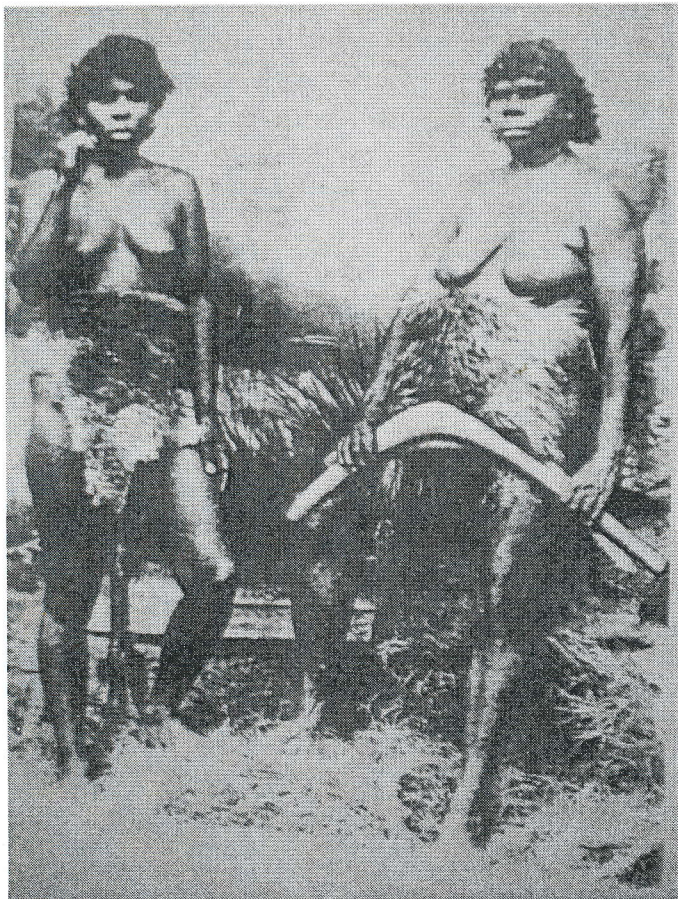
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1. THE FIRST WOMEN OF THE TWO RIVERS

The Birpai



The First Women of the Hastings and Manning Rivers are members of the Birpai or Biripi Nation (the spelling differs in Port Macquarie and Taree Districts). This area is classified as the Hastings Local Government Area.¹ The Birpai had already named the Hastings River the Dhoongang.² The Birpai territory was on the Northern side of the Manning and the Worimi territory on the Southern side.³ One estimate claims that at the time of European settlement, the Birpai Nation comprised 6,000 people.⁴

Indigenous women of the Hastings Valley c. 1900.⁵

Before white contact the Birpai women kept accounts of their lives in forms other than writing and many still do. Therefore, all records written by early literate Europeans are second-hand reports. In fact, we have no written first-hand evidence about the traditional society. Early accounts, for the most part, lack meaning, are scientific and were not usually recorded by the first white people to arrive in the area. The first written records describe a society already changed by white invasion and:

¹ van Kempen, Elaine. 2002. *Some Timber Stories of the Hastings*. Hastings Council.

² Birpai Elders talk to Trevor Corliss. 2003. "First Contact" in *People of the Two Rivers*.

³ Davis-Hurst, Patricia. 1996.

⁴ Urban, Frank 2003

⁵ McLachlan, Jaen. ? *Place of Banishment: Port Macquarie 1818-1832*. Hale & Iremonger. p91

Of course, all societies change all the time and Aboriginal societies are no exception; but gradual – or even rapid – internally regulated change is very different from the disruption, massacres, and dispossession suffered by Australian Aborigines with the onset of colonization.⁶

The historical context in which these early accounts were written and the author's background and objectives need to be considered before using them. For the most part, they were written by males with Eurocentric values and they recorded very little of what they saw and heard, with scant regard to women. Even those written by women such as Annabella Boswell show a definite class bias with little interest in Indigenous peoples.

It is important to question the early observations made by observers of the Birpai women. With caution, the accounts of early explorers such as John Oxley, Phillip Parker King and early officials at Port Macquarie are still useful and represent some of the scarce written records available to us to make any reasonable inferences about the Aboriginal past.

Oxley's report to Lachlan Macquarie is brief but King gives a more detailed account. Colonial Secretary records give many details of early contact. These records, however, need to be used in conjunction with contemporary accounts given by Aboriginal women. If we use both written & oral history sources we can glimpse at the gendered existence of Birpai women before white contact.

The Birpai women lived in settled villages along the river banks and around the lakes.⁷ They enjoyed a mild climate, rich in seafood & bush fruits and had an intimate knowledge of their forest environment. Mary Bundock claims that there was an annual cycle of movement to the river flats and coast during the summer months and inland to the mountain ranges and upper reaches of the rivers during winter.⁸ However, Ella Simon's grandmother told her that the women of the mountains were called Winmurra and the women of the coast were called Mariket⁹ indicating two distinct groups.

The men and women co-operated in the collection of food. The role of the women was to gather firewood, collect shellfish (such as oysters, pippies and freshwater mussels), bush tucker (such as roots, leaves, seeds, tubers, yams, witchetty grubs, fruits and berries) and sometimes turtle eggs. Many of these foods were eaten raw while others were cooked – generally broiled over an open fire or roasted on hot coals.

⁶ Williams, Nancy M. & Jolly, Lesley. 1994. "From Time Immemorial?" in Saunders & Evans

⁷ Van Kempen, Elaine. 2002. *Some Timber Stories*. Hastings Council.

⁸ Bundock, Mary. 1978:263 quoted in Berzins, 1996:5

⁹ *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia* p 127 – Biripi



Biripi Women looking for Cobra (wood oyster) -
L to R - Marge Maher, Sister Stella Russell and Ella Simon¹⁰

Mary Bundock claims that the 'Biripi' women steamed small marsupials wrapped in leaves or ti-tree bark in the hollow of a scooped out ant hill while the women of the Dainggatti used a ground pit. Sometimes more complex food preparation took place as in the pounding into a cake then roasting of the seeds of the Bunya pine and pounding and soaking of the beans of the Moreton Bay chestnut which removed its toxicity, making it edible. ¹¹

While men hunted larger animals both men and women hunted smaller ones such as echidnas, snakes, lizards, goannas, freshwater turtles, bush turkeys, ducks, fish, grubs and gathered wild honey. Sometimes smaller marsupials like pademelons or fish were trapped in 'drives' due to the co-operated efforts of all members of the group. Sometimes toxic plants were used to stun fish before catching. ¹²

The children were taken along with their mothers into the bush to teach them the art of finding food and medicines. Healing their sick children and each other was also the role of women:

*The kino of the Red Bloodwood was applied to cuts to assist with healing, it was also used as a remedy for diarrhoea. For the latter treatment, the kino was carefully wrapped inside a piece of food so that it did not come into contact with the mouth. Gum resin from several species of 'Acacia' was also used to treat diarrhoea.*¹³

¹⁰ Cited in Davis-Hurst. 1996:175

¹¹ Bundock, Mary. 1978:263 quoted in Berzins. 1996:5 & Davis Hurst 1996:18

¹² Young, 1926:5 quoted in Berzins 1996:5

¹³ van Kempen. 2002. *Some Timber Stories of the Hastings*. Hastings Council.

Birpai women manufactured sophisticated implements and containers for use in cooking and hunting. The digging stick was highly valued by the women. In her diary Annabella Boswell described its use by the 'Dainggatti' women of Port Macquarie:

*"At Port Macquarie the Dainggatti women and children used pieces of wood with a flat end to dig for cockles on the beach."*¹⁴

They were made from hardwood sticks of varying lengths with a point at one end and a chisel-shape at the other. The women had a multitude of uses for them including collecting a variety of foods such as edible roots and tubers. They were also used to open termite mounds and honey nests and to extricate small marsupials and reptiles from their burrows. In addition, they were used to strip bark from trees and dig earth to prepare an oven. The Birpai women would have used them to collect shellfish and spear fish which were trapped in rock holes during low tide.¹⁵

Fish hooks were crafted out of bone or shell. Fishing lines, dilly bags, fishing and hunting nets and net bags for carrying children were made from the inner rind of the bark of the native hibiscus bush. It was soaked for three days and then chewed to make it flexible enough to twist into a string. Grass fibres were also used to make dilly bags. The sheath of the leaf stalk of the Bangalow palm was made into water containers.¹⁶

Women on the north coast of New South Wales:

fashioned deep, boat-shaped water carriers out of the leaves of the Bangalow Palms by bending the mainrib of the long, pinnate leaf to the shape they wanted, tying the ends together with a cord handle, then lacing the pinules in such a tight weave that no water seeped through them. These water carriers were traded.

Aboriginal communities all over Australia were connected by trade routes which were used to trade unique foods and tools with other groups.¹⁷

Bone was used by the women to make needles which in turn were used with animal sinew to sew possum skin and other fur together to make into a rug.¹⁸ The skins were also used to make garments (sometimes girdles) together with bark fibre.¹⁹

¹⁴ Boswell, Annabella 1890:9

¹⁵ Davis-Hurst. 1996:196

¹⁶ Bundock, Mary. 1978:262-266 & Prentis, Malcolm D.: 1984:4 in Berzins 1996:6

¹⁷ Van Kempen, Elaine. 2002. *Some Timber Stories of the Hastings*. Hastings Council.

¹⁸ Young, Mrs JH. 1926:4 in Berzins 1996:6

¹⁹ Berzins 1996:6

Middens are made by Aboriginal people, camping in the one area, as they throw the shells from their shellfish into a heap. The middens can become quite large over the years. Many disappeared as the European's built their settlement. The Port Macquarie Cottage Hospital was built on a midden site late in the nineteenth century.²⁰ The Europeans found a use for the shells in roadbase and fertilizers. ²¹ Gunyahs were erected if a camp was set up by placing sheets of stringybark over a sapling held up by two forked sticks.²²

Around Easter time the Birpai waited for large schools of mullet to move into the rivers:

*"Kooris always knew when the mullet were moving because the hairy grubs would be travelling in a line. Koories looked for the signs around that time of year. This was a time when the winds turned to the south west and would bring the fish in close to the shore. The wind direction played a big part in catching the fish. The right conditions have to be present if you are to be successful. The Kooris would camp on the shoreline waiting for the right winds to come ..."*²³

Similarly, during late December, the Birpai watched for more pippies and abalone. ²⁴

In Aboriginal groups, the place of women's work was closely related to the birth site of their babies. They harvested bush tucker and hunted its animals usually with other women. As part of the religious belief-system the site of a baby's birth was related to a plant or animal. This was called its dreaming or totemic identity. There is much debate among analysts about which groups held particular beliefs:

*The foetus signaled its totem animal by making the mother ill when she ate it, or when she walked past a land feature, such as a hill or rockpool representing its dreaming, or saw some other meaningful sign. Some women 'caught' babies from actual baby spirit trees or places. In these special locations, baby spirits waited for a beautiful mother to jump into. The spirit thus chose its own mother and family. Young girls were warned to avoid these baby places.*²⁵

Kate Langloh Parker, Ethnologist discusses the particular beliefs of northern New South Wales Aborigines:

²⁰ 'Hospitals' File Port Macquarie Historical Society.

²¹ Davis-Hurst. 1996:196

²² Berzins 1996:6

²³ Davis-Hurst. 1996:176

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Grimshaw et al. 1994:13

The bronze mistletoe branches with their orange-red flowers are said to be the disappointed babies whose wailing in vain for mothers has wearied the spirits who transform them into these bunches, the red flowers being formed from their baby blood. The spirits of babies and children who die young are reincarnated, and should their first mother have pleased them they choose her again and are called millanboo – the same again.²⁶

A special 'birthing hut' was built in preparation for the birth of each baby: *The hollow inside it in which the mother would lie to give birth was lined with Eucalyptus leaves and the hut smoked in preparation. A new coolamon made from a nearby tree was lined with ti-tree bark ready to receive the baby and more layers of the bark were placed under the baby. It was replaced regularly and the soiled bark burnt. The mother remained in the birthing hut until she healed.²⁷*

Children learned bush skills as they accompanied their mothers to gather food and fish. They were taught to observe and mimic rather than question. As boys grew older they spent less time with their mother and more time participating in male hunting and ceremonial activities. Girls continued to spend most of their time with the women to learn gendered skills and traditions.

Learning the kinship system was an important part of a child's education. These kin relationships were complex and bound or distanced them from particular people. This system created a world where every known and unknown person had a relationship to everyone else:

"Favours and obligations were constantly being bestowed or expected but they always had to be repaid. 'Avoidance' rules had to be followed"²⁸

Women were valued as producers of food and reproducers of children. How much power Biripai women exercised within their traditional society is difficult to gauge, just as it is in our contemporary society. Ritual activity was an important means of defining social status. Aboriginal men's rituals have been regarded as more prestigious than women's by writers in the past but many Aboriginal women may have been privately skeptical of this.²⁹

While the Biripai women kept alive their bitter history of dispossession and oppression by their colonizers. The white community wanted it to be buried and forgotten. It kept its focus on the future development of the area and with a

²⁶ Kate Langloh Parker's explanation is cited in A. Montagu, *Coming into Being Among the Australian Aborigines*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London. 1974:219-21 quoted in Grimshaw et al 1994:13

²⁷ van Kempen. 2002. *Some Timber Stories of the Hastings*. Hastings Council.

²⁸ Grimshaw et al. 1994:15

²⁹ Ibid.

highly mobile population this was not difficult. This 'cult of forgetfulness' was practiced on a national scale.³⁰

³⁰ Reynolds, Henry. 1999. *Why Weren't We Told?* Viking.