Victorian Aboriginal Strangling Cords

by

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The Pointing Bone, an instrument of Magic that plays such an important part in the death beliefs of the aborigines of Central Australia, has its counterpart in north-west and central Victoria in the form known to Europeans as a "strangling cord".

The strangling cord consists of a pointed bone, generally made from the fibula of a dead man (in the north-west) or of a kangaroo (in central and north-central Victoria), to the blunt end of which is attached a twisted cord of kangaroo sinew or of vegetable matter. The end of this cord is fashioned into a loop, through which the bone head is passed, thus forming a lariat.

As can be imagined, the mode of using this instrument also differs from the Central Australian way. According to Howitt (2) the Mukjara-waint tribe, one of the Wotjo nation, used the *yulo* or *jinert*, as it was known amongst them, by swinging it around by the cord and then throwing it in the direction of the intended victim. He was then, of course, expected to "swell up and die".

Amongst other tribes, such as the Wotjobaluk, Wathi-wathi and the Wurunjerri, according to Howitt (2) and no doubt by most other related tribes, the method was more positive, or personal, in as much as actual contact was made with the victim. The following procedure was generally adopted.

The medicine man would wait until his intended victim was seated near his camp fire when he would, from a hidden position, swing the *yulo* around his head, and throw it in the direction of the sitting man. This would compel the victim to come to the medicine man, who would throw him over his shoulder and carry him off to a secluded spot, where he would remove his kidney fat. On the other hand if the victim were asleep, the medicine man would creep up to him, and, passing the *yulo* under his neck and through the loop of the cord attached to it, would, with a quick jerk, pull it tight. Another cord was then passed around his feet, and the victim slung over his shoulder. The medicine man would then retire to a lonely spot, where the kidney fat would be removed at ease. The wound was then magically healed, and the man would return to his camp believing he had had a bad dream. Some days later, he would die. Such is the way the instrument was used.

In name, it appears to differ according to tribe. Thus, Howitt, gives *yulo* (bone) or *jinert* (sinew) for the Wotjo nation, and *ngyelling* for the Wurunjerri. Brough Smyth (3) calls it *nerum*, without giving the name of the tribe, while Balfour (1) uses *knarram* for the Loddon River aborigines.

In collections, strangling cords are very rare, the writer knowing of only two in Victoria, one in the National Museum of Victoria, Reg. No. 1584, and the other in the Burke Museum at Beechworth, Reg. No. 46. The specimen in the National Museum was originally described in 1887 by R. Brough Smyth (3) in his "Aborigines of Victoria". As this work is not readily available the paragraph dealing with the cord is quoted in full.

NERUM

"The noose used for strangling an enemy — *Nerum* — consists of a needle about six inches and a half in length, made of the fibula of the kangaroo, and a rope two feet six inches in length. The strands are

PLATE I
Nerum in National Museum Collection

doubled and twisted so as to form a loose rope of fourteen strands. One end of the rope is securely fastened to the head of the fibula by sinews (taken from the tail of the kangaroo), and the other end is made into a

loop also securely bound by sinews. The loose rope is elastic and very strong. The fibre of which the rope is composed is similar to that obtained by pounding and washing the roots of the bullrush; but a suitable material may be got also from the bark of the *Eucalyptus obliqua*. It is well and thoroughly twisted. The Aboriginal carrying this noose tracks his enemy to his *miam*; and having marked the spot where he has gone to sleep, he approaches him stealthily, slides the bone under his neck, puts it through the loop, and quickly draws it tight, so as to prevent him from uttering the slightest sound. He then throws the body with a jerk over his shoulder, and carries it to some secluded spot where he can take securely and at ease the kidney-fat".

The second example which the present writer recently discovered in the Burke Museum at Beechworth differs visibly from the first. Unfortunately it consists of only the head, or bone, part, but enough cord is wrapped around the base to make a description of it possible. The head is 19 cm. or about $7\frac{1}{2}$ inches in length and 8 mm. or about 5/16th of an inch thick at the centre, tapering to a point at each end. As can be seen by the photograph (Plate 2) it is not straight, but has a gentle curve
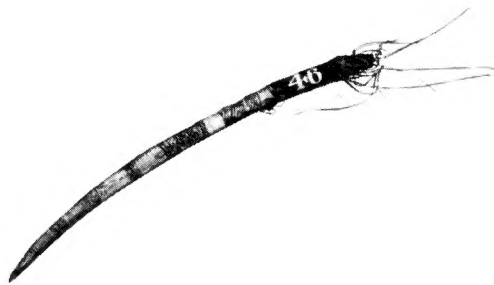

PLATE 2
Yulo in Beechworth Museum

which would render it ideal for passing under the neck of a sleeping person. Further, it is decorated with a criss-cross pattern rendered in five encircling bands of unequal width and incised in the bone. By what remains of it, the cord appears to be made of bark, possibly *Eucalyptus obliqua*, as mentioned by Brough Smyth. It is tied to the bone in exactly the same way as the former *nerum*, but with fine native-made string wound around and around, the finished object being smeared over with vegetable gum. (This last detail was not mentioned by Brough Smyth although it is present in his specimen (Plate 1)). Further, it has the

remains of the sinew of some animal tied in a knot at the end of the bone and over the string winding. Attached to this object is a very old label, which with some difficulty I have read as follows. "One of a bundle of seven or eight similar implements varying in length from about 3 in. to about 12 in., found by a shepherd hanging around the neck of an aboriginal skeleton exposed in a tree near Cathcart, Ararat, Victoria. Mr. H. L. Jones who gave it to me says that he was informed that they were surgical implements and that the natives were much irritated when they found he had them and were very anxious to obtain them from him. Mr. William Templeton tells me that this is the implement used for taking out the fat. An incision is made in the abdomen and this bone is inserted and turned around among the intestine until the caul fat is rolled on it. It is then withdrawn. The aborigines believe that they increase their strength and courage by anointing themselves with the human fat thus obtained."

Unfortunately the Burke Museum cannot supply the details as to when this interesting relic was obtained, but they have a photograph of a group of native implements, amongst which is the object in question, and which bears the date of October 1877. The *yulo* has been there at least since then. The other specimens in the photograph were all collected between 1850 and 1860.

The mention of the skeleton exposed on a tree and found by a shepherd would tend to give this bone a very early date. It is very probable that it was the skeleton of a "Medicine Man" as only important people were exposed on platforms. That he was exposed with his Magic objects tied around his neck by a sinew cord, the remains of which still adhere to the bone, is also in keeping with aboriginal practice of burying a dead man's possessions with him.

REFERENCES

1 Balfour, H., Strangling-Cords from the Murray River, Victoria, Australia. Man Art. 94, 1901.

2. Howitt, A. W., "The Native Tribes of South-east Australia". London, 1904.

3. Smyth, R. Brough, "The Aborigines of Victoria". Melbourne, 1878.