

NATIVE/TYPE NAME

/ MESSAGE STICKS.

NO.

5

COLLECTION/DATE

R.M. Berndt / January 24th 1947 (a,b,d); late 1946 (c); April 14th 1947 (e)

HISTORY

(a) (b) and (d) were obtained by the collector from Ngaradjin; was sent to the collector. (see below). (e) was also sent to the collector via Mawalan

INFORMANT

Ngaradin (a,b,d) ; Mawalan (e)

LOCATION

Aust: N.T: Yirrkalla, N.E. Arnhem Land.

MAP

No

DISTRIBUTION

Used throughout most of Australia, though sticks of this style are characteristic of Arnhem Land only. (see Belief/ Meaning).

ASSOCIATION (S)

Walamba (or Murngin) people

ORIGINATOR (S)

(a) - Mianggadja of Groote Island.(b) - Ngaradjin of Yirrkalla (Mangealilji mada)(c) - Bindjalbuna - 'Slippery'(d) - Wonggu of Pt. Bradshaw (Djabu mada)(e) Mora (Dadiwi mada dua moiety) or Guncoilma (Djambad boina mada, dua moiety)

DESCRIPTION (S)

Made from a blonde wood <sup>(rectangular with)</sup> incised meaningful designs. Some have fur or wool attachments. Two have been red ochred before incising.  
2" to 3" in length.

MANUFACTURE

Specific: Made of soft 'milk-wood' and engraved with sharp stone chips.

Human hair has been used on one (a)

General: Usually made from gidyea, ti-tree, or any other convenient wood; coloured black, yellow or red <sup>(throughout Australia)</sup> and ranging from 2-4" in length. The sticks may be of various shapes from flat to round with a variety of patterns. A twig in the rough may also be used marked in various places, or a bundle of rags tied round with twine or cotton etc. Holes or notches as well as engraved markings may be used on the sticks

For Australia

BELIEF/MEANING

in General :-

Sticks can be divided generally in 2 kinds. Those used in ceremony, and more general purpose secular message sticks.

Generally the secular sticks serve only as a memory aid or a passport through foreign or hostile territory. The designs themselves have meaning but they cannot be read by anyone except the messenger who has been told the meaning by the sender of the stick. ie. There is no sign language the marks being given arbitrary meaning by the sender. The messenger in all cases an adult man, never a woman, and usually a trusted close relative of the sender.

In some regions namely Queensland and S.E. Australia and southern edge of the Nullabor, and Melville and Bathurst Islands designs sometimes refer to topographical features which the messenger must pass before his destination is reached. Sometimes also there were notches representing the length of the journey in days. N.E. Arnhem Land sticks (like these) do not have such topographical features represented however. Message sticks from Arnhem Land are usually small flat slabs of wood, or a cylinder tapering at both ends. Patterns are mainly vertical diagonal lines, diamonds, and human figures. A variety of such sticks are shown in Ref. 1. to 5.

The designs on ceremonial message sticks have mythological significance. They refer to approaching rituals or ceremonial trade relations. N.B. Those on Bathurst and Melville Islands are more elaborately carved and usually constitute an invitation to a ceremony (a mortuary rite) or are <sup>informative eg. an event such as</sup> notification of a death.

According to both Howitt and Roth who collected in 1897 and 1904 respectively, message sticks were used for several purposes, to call participants of a ceremony together, to invite fellow tribesman to a hunt or fight, and to convey a personal request from one aboriginal through a messenger to another asking him for food or goods, or to inform of a death (the latter two being <sup>more</sup> secular usages.)



BELIEF/MEANING Cont.      Specific:

Designs are as follows and have the following meaning:-

(a) This Message stick concerns an impending 'marriage'. It was sent from Groote Island by the girls father who is Mianggadja to Ngaradiin at Yirrkalla, whose son is the girls brother. It bears the message that if the son is now a man the girl can be sent to him. The design itself represents a man.

(b) The return message stick, meant to be sent by Ngaradiin of Yirrkalla to the girl's parents at Groote saying that a girl from Groote was promised to Ngaradin's son, and that all is ready at Yirrkalla for her to be sent.

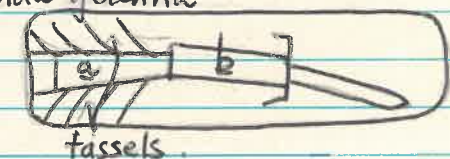
(c) Sent by Bindjalbuma (Slippery) camped at Arnhem Bay to the collector R.M. Berndt, who was at Yirrkalla at the time. The stick represents a request for plugs of tobacco, the strokes on the reverse (back) side representing the number wanted, and the curved shape (on the front side) representing the billabong at Marabi where Bindjalbuma was camped, the notches along its sides being the number of men he has around him there.

(d) Sent by Wonggu (Djabu mada) of Pt. Bradshaw to Ngaradjin (Manggalilgi mada) at Yirrkalla requesting tobacco from him. The design is a special Djabu mala emblemic one, and the stroke marks down its sides represent the no. of sticks of tobacco needed.

(e) Sent by Mora and Gunoilma to Mawalan (Riradingu mada) to let the collector (R.M.B.) know that they intend to make a new djuda pole with feathered tassels and bring it from Arnhem Bay to Yirrkalla (see detail below). Gunoilma had a sore heel and had consequently been delayed in coming to Yirrkalla to see R.M.B. and so sent this to also let him know that all was well.

2/63/147

a = djuda sacred rangga (djuda tree), an old one  
 b = djanda goanna



FUNCTION/USE      For communication: Both to inform and request.

REFERENCE (S)

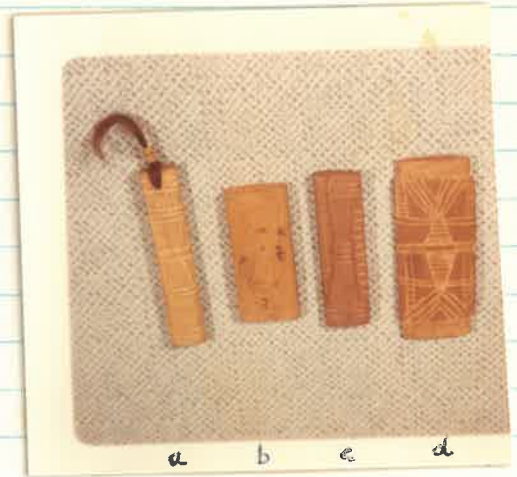
R.M.B. Notebooks: Book No. 16 January 24th 1947. Yirrkalla (a,b,d)

Film:

1. Mountford, C.P. 'The American - Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land' Vol. I. 1956. Melbourne.
2. Specner, Sir Baldwin. 'Guide to the Australian Ethno. College in Nat. Museum of Vic'. 3rd ed. 1922. p. 70-73.
3. Howitt A.W. 'Native Tribes of S.E. Australia' 1964 pp. 601-70. Pl. 42 E

4. Roth, W.E. 'Ethnographical Studies among N.W. - Central Qld Aborigines'. 1897 p. 137  
Figs 326-38.
5. Mountford, C.P. 'The Tiwi-their Art Myth and Ceremony' 1958. Melbourne. p. 98-107.
6. Berndt's R.M. & C.H. 'The World of the First Australians' Ure Smith 1964 p. 382.

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04/



e (front.)



e (back)