



## Yarnuping 9 - Women and Salt Water Country – Fishing

Karen Smith & Phil Hunt

Sydney Aboriginal women are too often forgotten in the stories of Bennelong and other Sydney men of the late 1700s, early 1800s. I wanted to bring them to the fore in this Yarnuping about Saltwater Women. You will note that the commentators are largely men, which adds further imbalance to the story, so we must take things with a grain of salt.

### Malgun

The Aboriginal custom of female finger- tip removal – '*malgun*',

*"the finger is taken off by means of ligature (generally a sinew of a kangaroo) tied so tight as to stop the circulation of the blood, which induces mortification and the part drops off. I remember to have seen Colbee's child, when about a month old, on whom this operation had just been performed by her mother."* Watkin Tench 1788 page 248

For example, Captain Arthur Phillip, of the First Fleet, interpreted finger tip removal as follows:

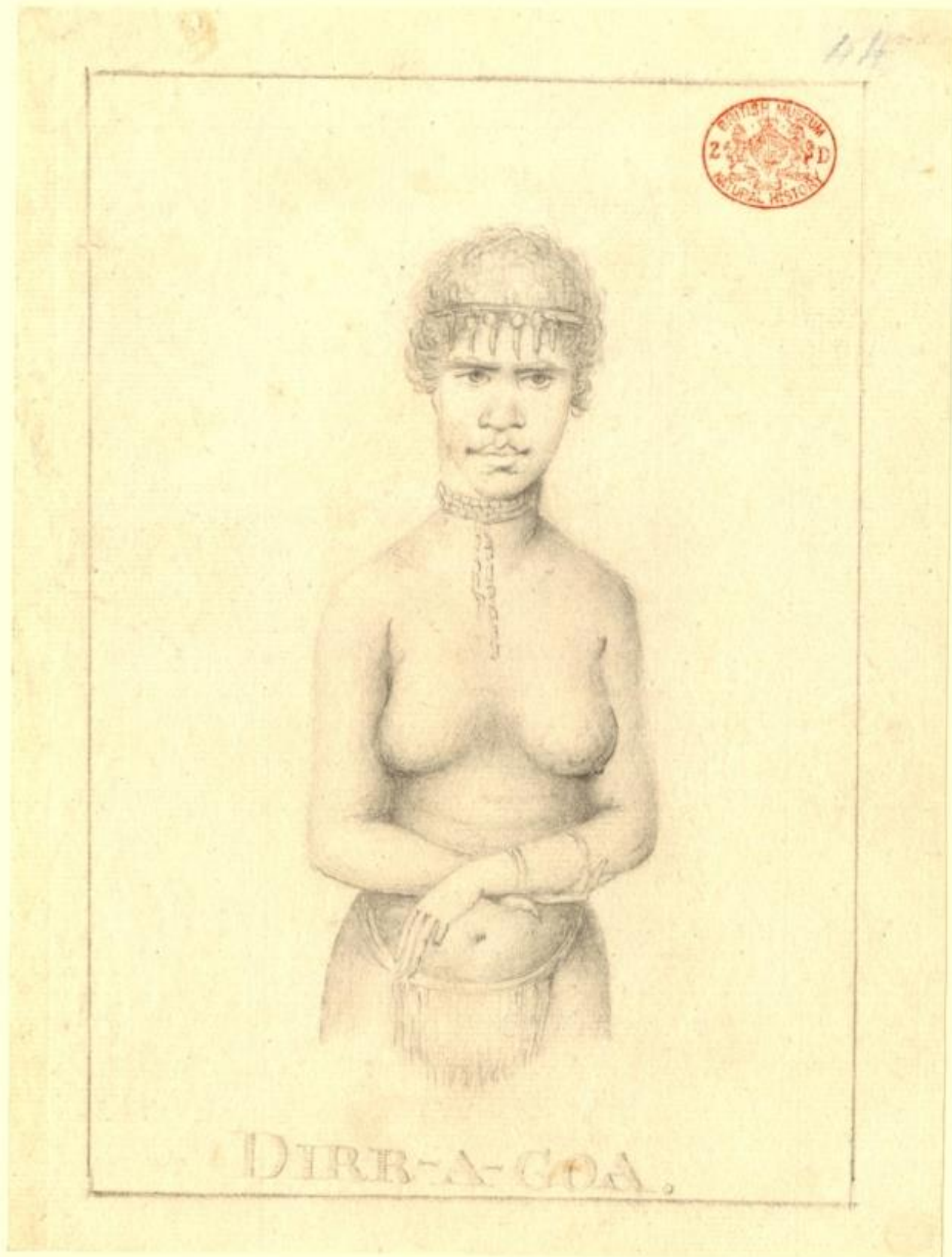
*"It was now first observed by the Governor that the women in general had lost two joints from the little finger of the left hand. As these appeared to be all married women, he at first conjectured this privation to be part of the marriage ceremony; but going afterwards into a hut where were several women and children, he saw a girl of five or six years of age whose left hand was thus mutilated; and at the same time an old woman, and another who appeared to have had children, on both of whom all the fingers were perfect. Several instances were afterwards observed of women with child, and of others that were evidently wives, who had not lost the two joints, and of children from whom they had been cut. Whatever be the occasion of this mutilation, it is performed on females only."*

Aboriginal women's stencilled handprints

Here you can see the *Malgun* amputation

These stencilled hands are protected heritage and are on the Northern Beaches. Very rare and showing the signs of graffiti





Drawing by Thomas Watling of a Cammeraygal woman showing the Malgun amputation

John Turnbull wrote in 1800, that *malgun* was related to fishing.

*Whilst the female child is in its infancy, they deprive it of the two first joints of the little finger of the right hand; the operation being effected by obstructing the circulation by means of a tight ligature; the dismembered part is thrown into the sea, that the child may be hereafter fortunate in fishing.*

In 1860's William Scott, grew up in Port Stephens. Scott explains how this practice was related to fishing:

*An Aboriginal woman, Fanny, who was a servant of our family for many years, was in her girlhood days dedicated to the art of fishing. When quite young, a ligature was tied about the first joint of her left finger very tightly, and being left there for a considerable time, the top portion mortified and, in time, fell off. This was carefully secured, taken out into the bay, and, with great solemnity, committed to the deep. The belief was that the fish would eat this part of the girl's finger, and would ever, thereafter, be attracted to the rest of the hand from which it had come.*

Scott said the *malgun* operation was effective, by revealing that Fanny 'was indeed a wonderfully lucky fisher.'



Thomas Watling 'A canoe of New South Wales'

## Bara

The women fished from the canoe with the *bara*. The *bara* is recent technology.

Shell fish-hooks were observed and reported on by a number of people from the First Fleet. They mention the fish hooks being made and used by local women.

*"Considering the quickness with which they are finished, the excellence of the work, if it be inspected, is admirable",* Watkin Tench said on witnessing Barangaroo making one on the north shore.

So far the only archaeological evidence is from the Turbo species. Pointed stone files were used to create the shape and then file down the edges to the recognisable form. In terms of time frame, the reliable specimens of shell fish-hooks or files are all from within the last 1000 years. Shell tends to have a lower preservation rate than other archaeological materials and fish-hooks are small, rare and fragile.

*When we reached the opposite shore we found Abaroo and the other women fishing in a canoe, and Mrs Johnson and Barangaroo, sitting at the fire, the latter employed in manufacturing fish – hooks.*

Watkin Tench 1788 pg.149



The stages of making a fish hook from the turban shell  
The use of the file to make shell fishing hooks



*One of the women made a fishing hook while we were by her, rubbing the inside of what is commonly called the pearl oyster shell, by rubbing it down on the rocks until thin enough and then cut it circular with another, shape the hook with a sharp point rather than bent in and not bearded or barbed*

**William Bradley 6<sup>th</sup> March 1788**

*The women are chiefly employed in the canoes, with lines and hooks; the lines appear to be manufactured from the bark of various trees which we found here, of a tough stringy nature, and which, after being beaten between 2 stones for some time, becomes very much like and the same colour as a quantity of oakum, made from old rope. This they spin and twist into two stands; in fact I never saw a line with more than two. Their hooks are commonly made from the inside, or mother of pearl, of different shells; the talons of birds, such as those of hawks, they sometimes make use of, but the former are considered as best*

**John Hunter 25<sup>th</sup> March 1788**



By Philip  
Gidley  
(att) King  
From the  
collections  
of the  
State  
Library of  
New  
South  
Wales

## Where Did the Technology Come From

Did the technology develop locally or come from another part of Australia or further afield? There are parallels with shell fish-hooks from islands colonised by the Polynesians. Members of the First Fleet wondered at some possible connection as some women from Tahiti also had the last digit of the smallest finger missing like the Sydney coastal clans.

Dr Val Attenbrow from the Australian Museum concludes:

“at present I interpret the evidence as reflecting the relatively recent introduction of hook and line fishing with the inclusion of shell fish-hooks into the coastal tool kit almost 1000 years ago and their adoption by people in only a relatively restricted area of the NSW coast.”

## Effects of Colony on Saltwater Resources

### Booralee fishing town – a story by Joanne Sippel

*'Sydney, it is true, need not be at all alarmed for the supply of oysters in her market, for no sooner is the wealth of one river exhausted than the dredgers can turn to another....which has not yet been rifled.'*

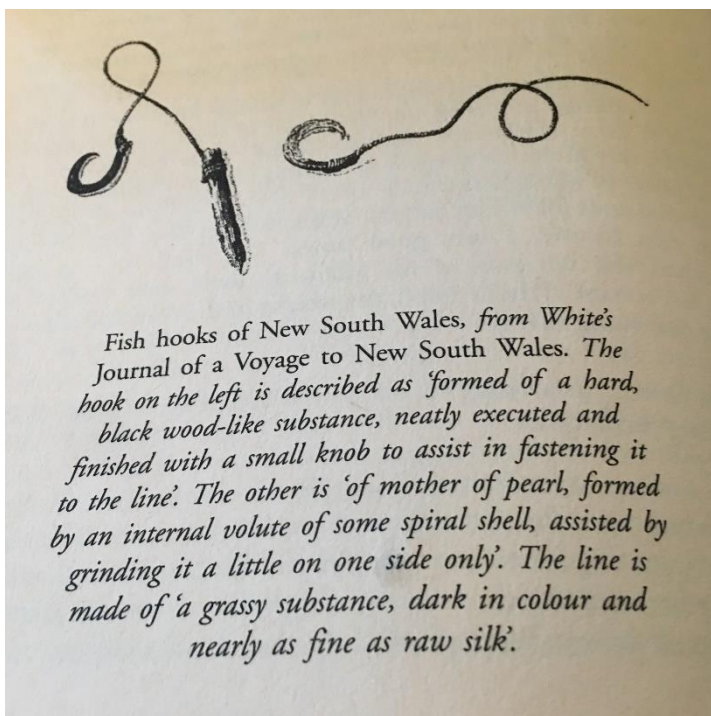
The Sydney Mail, Saturday, 9 September 1871, p 893

*Staked nets, sometimes a mile (1.6 kilometres) long, were set up on the mud flats inside the low water mark and when the tide fell the fish were trapped on the sand banks. Fishermen then just picked up the fish they wanted but left the rest to rot. Liming and dynamiting of fish in tidal waters also took place whereby the fish were poisoned or stunned for an easy catch.*

*The idea that a fishing ground could be plundered and then another found for the same purpose was losing traction in the second half of the nineteenth century. The same fishermen who harvested the waters of Botany Bay as if there was no tomorrow were realising the damage it caused. The first sign of overfishing and over-dredging was seen in the rapid depletion of the Botany Bay oyster stocks, in high demand by Sydney's food and building industries. By 1896, the mud oysters of Botany Bay were declared extinct.*

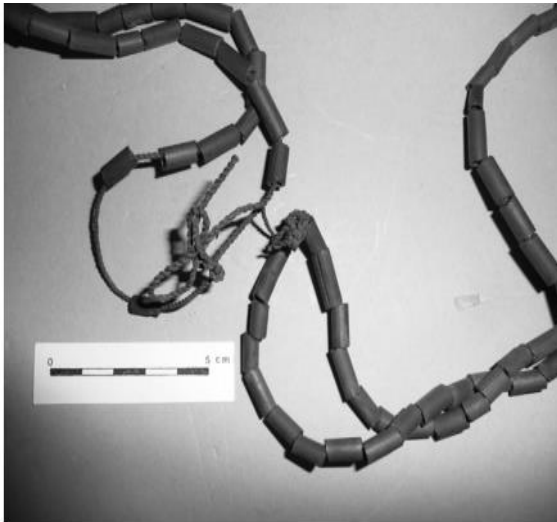
*During the investigation, John Puckeridge admitted that he was the first man to destroy the stocks of garfish by netting the full width of the Georges River. After this inquiry, the [Fisheries Act](#) underwent a major overhaul in an effort to control the fishing industry more effectively. In practice the new rules of the 1881 Act had many pitfalls and were considered very harsh.*

New South Wales Royal Commission Appointed on the 8th January, 1880, to Inquire Into and Report Upon the Fisheries of this Colony, Report of the Royal Commission Appointed on the 8th January, 1880, to Inquire Into and Report Upon the Actual State and Prospect of the Fisheries of this Colony: Together with the Minutes of Evidence and Appendices, New South Wales Parliament, Sydney, 1880, p 25



From John White's Journal of a Voyage to NSW

## Other Womens Objects



**Held in the Le Havre Museum of Natural History Paris**

Reed necklaces worn by both Sydney Saltwater men and women



**Held in the British Museum**

### **Description**

Water vessel made of bull kelp (*Durvillaea potatorum*) consisting of a single piece of dark brown coloured kelp. Sides are gathered together and wooden sticks passed through the folds, preserving its shape. Handle is of twisted fibre, knotted together near the centre.

**Made by:** Aboriginal Australian

**Production date**  
1850 (circa)

**Production place**

**Made in:** Tasmania

**Oceania:** Australia:  
Tasmania

Made and used by women in southern NSW, Victoria and Tasmania

This skill is being reclaimed

<https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/185.2012.a-c/>

