

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this thesis is a reconstruction of some aspects of the traditional culture of the Aborigines of the north west of New South Wales.

The area discussed is bordered on the east by the eastern limit of the Cobar Pediplain, on the west and north by the New South Wales and Queensland borders, and on the south by a line drawn from west to east at the latitude of Menindee.

The Darling River flows from the north-east to the south-west of this area, and was an inevitable starting point for the study. It is in the immediate Darling area that the traditional Aboriginal culture is best described. Moreover, many writers have suggested that the Darling River was a great modifying influence on the immediate environment, making it a more favourable one for Aboriginal exploitation. Specifically, it has been suggested that because of the presence of a permanent water supply, and of riverine foods, the Aboriginal population of the Darling was higher than in the surrounding area, and led a more sedentary life.<sup>1</sup>

One of the problems in a reconstruction of the traditional life of the Aborigines of the area is to determine whether this was in fact the case. Throughout the thesis, comparisons have been made between the Darling River Aborigines, and those living to the east and west, in an attempt to determine how far the existence of a permanent stream in an arid environment did effect the Aboriginal

pattern of life. The paucity of the sources for the areas to the east and west of the Darling have made this a difficult problem in many instances. More information could have been obtained by extending the area further to the west or east, but this would destroy the advantages of a relatively homogeneous environmental unit. There is a gradual rainfall and vegetation change from east to west over the whole area, but it is a minor one within the limits of the study.

The New South Wales and Queensland borders have been chosen as purely arbitrary and convenient boundaries for the study; but they do serve the purpose of limiting it geographically. The eastern limit of the Cobar Pediplain has been chosen as the eastern boundary of the area, because it represents the boundary of what is commonly called North Western New South Wales; further east the western slopes of the New England Tablelands represent a different environment.

To the south the limit of the study area has been placed at Menindee. The major sources describing the area below Menindee write of the Aborigines of the Murray-Darling, rather than the Darling, and do not usually distinguish between the two.<sup>2</sup> This makes such material almost impossible to use. Moreover, there is a real difference in environment between the upper and central Darling, and the lower Darling. The Murray, and the Darling at its junction with this stream,

are much larger bodies of water than the Darling in its upper reaches. For these reasons the study has been limited to the upper and central Darling regions.

The reconstruction utilises the written sources for the area. The most valuable are the writings of explorers and early settlers who had some contact with the Aborigines before European settlement had destroyed their traditional culture. The problems and limitations involved in the use of such sources have been outlined in Chapter I.

Since the thesis is a reconstruction, large sections of it are of necessity of a descriptive nature, involving a compilation and summary of information from various sources. The details of such descriptive information have been given in table form; the text of each chapter concentrates on summarising the available information, and discussing its significance, along with any problems in its interpretation.

Chapter II outlines the main features of the environment within the study area. Chapter III discusses Aboriginal population, group size and movement, and tribal divisions. Chapter IV is concerned with the food quest. Aboriginal diet and food gathering methods. Chapter V describes the material culture of the Aborigines of the area, and discusses the possible effects of the environment on the development and use of weapons and implements. Chapter VI is a brief summary of the religious and ritual aspects of Aboriginal life in the area. This field is really one for the social anthropologist, and a considerable amount of work has already been done by such specialists in the area;<sup>3</sup> the chapter is aimed,

therefore, at simply giving an outline of known practices and customs. Some aspects of Aboriginal culture, such as traditional myths and legends, and language, have been omitted, since these are complete problems requiring specialised training and knowledge not possessed by the writer.