

Michael-Shawn Fletcher and Professor Lesley Head, Plants: Past, Present and Future (2022) I wrote a very detailed chapter on this photograph, with much valuable input from Uncle Badger Bates, Aunty Sarah Martin and David Doyle. This chapter goes into great detail about all of the many plants and their usage featured in the picture. Here I share a small snippet with you.

cumbungi

To the right of Mary, resting on the roof of the shelter, is a large folded net. This net has been expertly made from string that has been made from plants. In this case, very likely cumbungi (Typha domingensis). Growing in

abundance along the edges of rivers and lakes, cumbungi is one of the most important plants used for food across the Murray-Darling river system. Our people ate the fresh flower shoots of cumbungi as a salad, but also dug out and collected the starchy root, steamed it in earthen ovens, then peeled and ate it. It is very tasty and has been likened to a type of potato. When eaten, a fibrous residue is left, which is twisted into a knot and later chewed to work into a useful fibre. This remnant fibre, after being worked in the mouth, was dried on the roof of dwellings. Once properly dry, it was then soaked

and scraped clean using a shell, twisted into string and then woven to make tools such as nets, bags and body adornments.

Abundance

Zena Cumpston

This photograph encodes many aspects of plants and our interactions with them over time on Barkandji/Barkindji Country, as well as our exceptionally well-honed skills in utilising plants and interacting with our Country to harness everything we need. Some of the plant usage is plain to see, but much is 'hidden in plain sight' that is, only our communities, or those with extensive knowledge of our people and culture may be able to recognise it.

Barkandji people, New South Wales

Abundance Jacob, Mary and Doughboy 2023, Melbourne, Wurundjeri Country

1879, photograph by Frederic Bonney inkjet print on canvas

New South Wales pastoral sheep station, where this photograph was taken. The brothers worked on and around Momba between the years 1865 and 1881, at a time when the pastoral industry had very recently encroached on Barkandji/Barkindji lands. This photograph is part of a series that feature many individuals, but in this particular photo Bonney's annotations tell us we can see Mary to the right, in the middle is her husband Jacob, and to the left is their daughter, Doughboy.

This photograph was taken in

1879 on our Barkandji/Barkindji

Country by Frederic Bonney, who

with his brother Edward, Bonney

annexed Momba Station, a western

came from and eventually returned

to Staffordshire in England. Together

In the book I recently co-authored with Wiradjuri Professor

2 grindstone

If we look to the right, at Mary's hands, we can see that she is making something and that she is

using what appears to be a sandstone grindstone to do so. Grindstones are an extremely important technology designed and developed by Australia's First Peoples,

grindstone

allowing diverse groups to exploit and greatly benefit from their available resources. The development of grindstones has allowed us to make nutrientrich pastes, and breads or dampers, and we know from various dating methods that this technology has been a part of the lives of the Indigenous peoples of Australia for tens of thousands of years. We are the world's

first bread-makers.

purslane/pig weed

Image courtesy State Library of NSW, PXA 562/p.10

grindstone continued

A large variety of plant species have been processed by our mob using grindstones. Native millet, sometimes called panicum (Panicum decompositum) is a grain that was abundant on our Barkandji/Barkindji Country and often used to make flour. Purslane, sometimes known as pigweed (*Portulaca olaracea*) was also used, stacked in heaps and moved a few days later to reveal piles of seed, that, like native millet, was then ground and made into a dough to cook on hot coals. nardoo plant

Along with purslane and native millet, the seeds of various wattle (Acacia) were often utilised, including one we call malka (Acacia aneura; mulga is the

common English name) that has seeds

that taste like sesame. The prickly wattle was also processed using grindstones, with a drop skin blanket used to collect seeds hit from their branches with a stick. Nardoo

nardoo seeds (Marsilea drummondii) seed cases were also processed through being milled, ground and mixed with water to form a dough, then cooked.

(3) storing grains and water

Frederic Bonney, who took this photo, noted that skin bags made from wallaby or a small kangaroo were used to store water and surplus seed harvests. To the right of Mary's hand you can see a water carrier made from kangaroo that maintains the shape of the animal. There are two of these skin bags in this picture, one may be for water and one may be storing the seed or grain being ground by Mary.



kangaroo grass seed source across south-

Many various seeds were stored by our mob, and it is known that over winter in particular, the seeds of acacia, saltbushes, flax plants and grasses were relied upon.

Archaeological evidence provides proof that seeds have been an important part of the subsistence patterns of people of this area, now known as the Darling basin, for at least the last 15,000 years. Effective modes of storage for seeds, water and other foods have been essential in our capacity to survive and to thrive.

(4) coolamon

The coolamon is a container made from carefully chosen sheets of bark removed from both hard- and softwood trees. While also used by men, coolamons are most often used by and associated with Aboriginal women as a

(quandong) multi-purpose tool, used as carriers for food, small utensils and babies, and for preparing and serving food. All over Country, markings in trees can be seen where our people have arrived at places to collect food and extracted a coolamon from a suitable tree to do so.

On our Barkandji/ Barkindji Country coolamons have been used to collect and carry many foods,

(bush banana) including karnpuka (quandongs/Santalum acuminatum), karkala

karkala

(bush banana/Marsdenia karnpuka (quandong) australis), highly nutritionally valuable tubers such as one now commonly refered to as 'murnong' (Microseris lanceolata) and mussels.

(5) karnka (digging stick)



karnka

Poking out behind the boomerang seen furthest to the left, and standing vertically, is what appears to be a large digging stick, known on our Country as karnka

Forming an essential part of a woman's toolkit, karnka are used to obtain plant foods such as tubers, as well as small game, reptiles and fish, and are effective for stripping bark from trees, digging earth ovens, preparing the foundations of dwellings, as a prop in ceremony and dance, and as a weapon.

They are expertly shaped so that one end will often resemble a shovel while the other is carved to a point for use a multi-purpose tool. After shaping, one or sometimes both ends are hardened by fire. On our Barkandji/Barkindji

large river mussels

around 100 years old).

Uncle Badger Bates

savs we Barkandii/

Barkindji mob are

like the mussels;

(this size may be

Country, Uncle Badger explained that near the river, river red gum (Eucalyptus camaldulensis) or black box wood (E. largiflorens) was most often used for karnka, whereas away from the river malka

(Acacia aneura) or niilya (Acacia loderi) was often favoured.

These karnka were not just a tool to procure food but also to help cultivate the soil. For example, in digging up edible tubers the karnka would act to till and aerate the soil.

(6) boomerang (hidden Ngatji)

David Doyle suspected the boomerangs would likely have been decorated with engravings made using a sharp stone, mussel shell or glass, as per the stylistic techniques Barkandji/Barkindji carvers have used for millennia, and continue to utilise today. He used a magnifying glass to study them for this stylistic flourish and discovered some beautiful 'hidden' cultural information. On the boomerang furthest away from Doughboy David spotted an exciting decoration that ties

this maker's work to the work of Barkandji/Barkindji artists and carvers today - an engraving of the Ngatji, running from the top left corner to the bottom right.

The Ngatji are the two Rainbow Serpents who created our Country, and who still reside in our Baaka/ Barka (Darling River) today. They are a common motif in all

Barkandji/Barkindji art, part of our Creation story and revered as living beings who must be respected through our care of Country and the water-ways they reside within. The Ngatji present here

(Rainbow Serpent Creator Being)

symbolise our cultural connection to each other and to Country over time, one that is not lost, since so much of our cultural world today revolves around these Creator Beings.

The presence of the Ngatji illuminates the centrality of our cultural beliefs to all parts of our existence and to every interaction with Country. Our cultural items are made with knowledge and respect for our Law

that attest to the knowledge and stories of our Old People over time, signposting our foundational responsibility to and reciprocity with Country. Mark making and all forms of artistic practice

bubbles in the Baaka/Barka warn you Ngatji is there

honour, animate and tell the story of Country as our living relative, our mother, whom we must look after, just as the Ngatji

must be cared for through our continued active custodianship of Country.

Linocut prints:

Zena Cumpston Barkandji people, New South Wales

ngarta-kiira (to return to Country) Melbourne, Wurundjeri

on Country

karnpuka seeds (quandong) being germinated in the emu's tummy. Carried vast distances excreted it begins to grow. People, animals and plants have a symbiotic relationship.

ngaratya Nici Cumpston, Zena Cumpston, David Doyle, Kent Morris, Adrianne Semmens and Raymond Zada (together, us group,

all in it together)

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