

## The Commemorative Tree

### Perspectives Drawn from Australians' First Nation Cultures

TVS Tree Knowledge/Planting Group

Before colonisation, the landscapes of Australia were carefully managed by Australia's First Nations peoples and regarded as places of great cultural knowledge. As the ecological custodians, Indigenous Australians had strict protocols governing the harvesting and destruction of species to ensure the sustainability of all living things within the biosphere. While certain sites were designed as sacred, so too were trees, which as ancient presences in the land were culturally modified for various purposes. The creation of scarred/carved trees and ring trees were amongst the practices undertaken as a form of visual communication.

**Aboriginal Carved/scarred trees** (carved trees known as dendroglyphs – two types, teleteglyphs and taphloglyphs) and usually over 100 years old. They mark sites of significance such as initiation (ceremonial-ground sites - teleteglyphs)<sup>1</sup> or burial sites (taphloglyphs)<sup>2</sup>, alternatively they are uncarved and have a smooth surface, indicating where sections of bark has been removed to make canoes, shields, paintings, coolamons (or carrying) vessels, and for the construction of other timber objects.

Tree carvings can be found dotted throughout Australia, but are mainly of NSW origin-specifically the work of Gamilaroi and Wiradjuri artists in the northern, central and eastern parts of the state. More than 7,500 Aboriginal-scarred trees have been recorded in NSW, but fewer than 100 carved trees remain standing in their original location. The rest have been removed for farming, forestry or development.<sup>3</sup> Early publications include the book Robert Milne's *The Dendroglyphs, or "Carved Trees" of New South Wales in 1918* which catalogued an estimated 600 Aboriginal tree carvings in NSW. The most common trees used were mature native trees close to waterways, lakes and floodplains, including *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*, commonly known as the river red gum, *Eucalyptus tereticornis*, commonly known as forest red gum, blue gum or red iron gum and *Eucalyptus melliodora*, commonly known as yellow box, honey box or yellow ironbark.

The burial sites marked the grave of a tribal leader, an important man, and the design or hieroglyph (taphloglyph), was encoded with significant cultural material related to him – such as representing the person's soul – the embodiment of his culture and history which reflects on the pathway for his spirit to return to the sky world.<sup>4</sup> Indigenous poet Gayle Kennedy of the Nyaampa-speaking nation in south western New South Wales writes of these trees. They were 'Memorial trees ... [with] sophisticated hieroglyphs of an ancient culture, an ancient civilization...[representing] arboreal classrooms ...our ceremonies and laws.'<sup>5</sup> There were often a number of carved trees that surrounded the burial site, their carved design facing the burial site to warn passers-by of the spiritual significance of the site.

There were a number of common symbols, curvilinear lines (most frequent type), chevrons (V-shaped designs), figurative images (most scarce) and scrolls or circles. The incisions were made with stone adzes and later, the blade of steel axes. The designs were periodically recarved to freshen them up. Those used for burial trees were usually more deeply incised than those for ceremonial ground, and the latter trees often had images of

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<sup>1</sup> Lindsay Black, *Burial Trees. Being the First of a Series on the Aboriginal Customs of the Darling Valley and Central New South Wales*, Robertson and Mullens Ltd., Melbourne, 1941. Fred McCarthy, 'The carved trees of New South Wales', *Australian Museum Magazine*, 1940, 7 (5), 161-166.

<sup>2</sup> Lindsay Black, *The Bora Ground*, F.H. Boothe, Sydney, 1944

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/land/aboriginal-scarred-trees#fn1>

<sup>4</sup> Op. cit, Lindsay Black, *Memorial Trees*.

<sup>5</sup> Gayle Kennedy, 'Viewing the carved tree exhibition', *English Association Southerly*, 2011, Vol (71) (2), p.196-198.

animal totem figures incised. These did not occur in the designs of burial trees.<sup>6</sup> Many of these trees have been lost from old age, or removed by pastoralists not wanting to have such signifiers of Indigenous land ownership and occupation on their properties.

With the revival of interest in scarred trees, sections of carved trees which were sectioned and sent to museums in the early years of settlement are being returned to their respective Aboriginal communities to aid the healing processes. Further Indigenous artists from all over New South Wales are looking at carved trees as inspiration or to revive the practice. For example, Aboriginal artist and Elder Vic Simms carved a tree in the Botanic Gardens in Sydney in 2011.<sup>7</sup>

**Ring trees** are those where the young supply branches were split and fused together using string woven from local plant fibre so as to train the branches to grow in the form of a ring shape over time.<sup>8</sup> There were often a number of rings created within the one tree. This process was done to signify a territorial boundary and was often close to a ceremonial site, a water junction and inlet or campsite. They hold stories that have cultural and spiritual significance.

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<sup>6</sup> Op. cit., Lindsay Black, *Memorial Trees*.

<sup>7</sup> Indigenous artists such as Mary Kennedy and Barbara Stanley, Millie Riley.  
<http://www.taligallery.com.au/nsw-carved-and-scarred-trees/>.

<sup>8</sup> <http://koorihistory.com/modified-trees-scar-trees/>.