COMMUNITY PLAY

Early travellers found communities at play more frequently than they might have predicted for a hunting and gathering society 'so entirely engrossed in the important duty of providing for their subsistence' (Oldfield 1856, 256). Many of these writers, themselves products of a Victorian ethos with its notions of propriety and decorum, found young and old often entangled in boisterous play — play that was designed not only to give expression to the abilities and skills of the players but to give expression to a community at leisure, full fed and finished for the moment with the tasks of subsistence. Some found these games 'distinctly childish' but most could not help but remark on the spirit and the endurance displayed as much as on the structure of the play and the materials so ingeniously employed: the balls, spinning tops, playing sticks, targets and airborne toys on which the play was centred.

When added together — the wide distribution and variety of ball games, skipping games, spinning toys, playing sticks, numerous airborne toys, marbles, and fireworks — all these present an aspect of Aboriginal society that ran somewhat counter to the expectations of those who first put their observations to paper. Hence, the scattering of references are marked with a quality of surprise, pleasure, and a certain attention to detail that, when examined collectively, provide us with a colourful pageantry of events.

BALL GAMES

Ball games, using a variety of balls and a number of strategies, were popular throughout Australia. In many areas, balls were a composite of string, grass, charcoal and skin, using sinew made of tendons or beeswax to secure the shape. For example, possum skins tied with string or stuffed with charcoal, inflated kangaroo pouches, scrotum or bladder, sometimes also stuffed with grass or fur and sewn would serve as small and lightweight but durable balls. Other balls were made of grass, string, wood, clay, burnt gypsum, emu feathers, and woven pandanus strips. For bat and ball games or 'hockey' games using sticks, stones or the woody seed or fruit of various plants served well.

The games played with these balls range from simple throwing/catching games or 'keep aloft' games, to more complex and active games involving kicking, pursuit, and a form of 'keep away' with interception strategies to gain possession of the ball. A game similar to 'boules' or 'bowls' was played in the Lake Eyre region, and a form of 'hockey' was played in areas of Queensland, Western Australia, and Torres Strait. Batting games were also recorded for areas of Queensland, Melville Island and the Kimberley.

Museum collections include approximately thirty-one balls of various types and from most regions across Australia (with the exception

The natives are without a doubt a happy and laughter loving people, and in those coastal and inland areas where the supply of food is abundant and continuous, their evenings are generally given over to amusements of some kind. Daisy Bates nd MS 365-36/88.

The native Australian seems to amuse himself with everything that comes his way.

Qld.

Carl Lumholtz 1889, 57.

They have many [games], all admirably adapted to strengthen and expand the corporeal powers, as running, jumping, throwing, etc ...

Vic.

William Thomas (1860) in TF Bride 1898, 402.

A people so entirely engrossed in the important duty of providing for their subsistence has but little leisure for amusement. Their continual struggle for existence leaves but little opportunity for relaxation, and accordingly we find that it is only during the summer months, when food is plentiful, that anything like systematic amusement is indulged in ...

On such rare occasions of riot, play, such as throwing the boomerang, a kind of pas de deux dance, etc., is indulged in.

WA.

Augustus Oldfield 1856, 256.

Their games, which old and young alike play, are distinctly childish. Boogaloh, or ball, is one. The ball, made of sewn-up kangaroo skin, is thrown in the air; whoever catches it goes with his or her division — for women join in this game — into a group in the middle, the other circling round. The ball is thrown in the air, and if one of the circle outside the centre ring catches it, then his side — namely, all his totem — go into the
middle, the others circling round, and so on. The totem keeping it the longest wins.
Narran River, NSW. Juwalarai people.
Catherine Parker 1905, 129.

Another game was Pirru Pirru. It was played with a ball made from kangaroo skin stuffed with grass, and sewn up. Pirru meant ball. As in the first game, sides were picked, but the women joined in. The ball was thrown up in the air, and caught here and there, each side trying to keep it to themselves or to catch it from the opposite one.
Brisbane region, Qld. Jagara people.

And there were other games played in keewong camps ... and thatpil (balls, sometimes made of inflated kangaroo pouches).
ca 1900, Ivanhoe area, NSW, Ngjamba people.
Eliza Kennedy 1982, 8.

A ball, similar to the one used in cricket but made of grass tied up with string and then covered with beeswax, is, or was, used for this game, where men of different moiety took sides as in football, and the game was started by kicking the ball into the air. Once kicked off however, the hands could not touch the ball again, only the feet were used for this purpose, and the side who kept it in the air and away from the others were looked upon as the winners.
NT.
William Harney 1952, 378.

Young men have a game they call bowtgee (going about). A ball is made of paper bark, firmly tied round with string, and about the size of a tennis ball; there are no definite rules for the game, which simply consists of throwing the ball from one to the other very rapidly, and it is wonderful what a time they will keep it going. A young fellow will often just touch the ball, and make it glance off to the next man. A terrific yell of derision greets the unfortunate one who lets it drop.
Gulf of Carpentaria.
W G Stretton 1893, 244.

of the more complex and difficult to conserve examples of composite skin balls used throughout Australia).

COMPOSITE BALLS
A common ball used for the various throwing and kicking games would be made, in its simplest form, of kangaroo or possum skin sewn tightly together such as those seen in New South Wales and Victoria, composed of old opossum skins, tightly rolled up, and covered with a fresh and strong piece of skin, nicely and firmly sewn together with opossum tail sinews' (Beveridge 1889, 45) or 'strips of opossum pelt rolled tightly round a piece folded up and covered with another bit sewn tightly with sinews' (Howitt 1904, 770). Daisy Bates (nd MS 365-36/92) found that hairstring as well as sinew was used by the 'Southern natives' to stitch these balls and Walter Roth (1897, 129) found balls in north-west-central Queensland made of rags (as well as balls made of skin) tied with possum string or hair twine. More complex balls were made from kangaroo scrotums into 'small bags stuffed with fur' or with kangaroo bladders or skin similarly stuffed with fur, grass or charcoal that had been pounded to provide them 'solidity without much increase in weight'. The unidentified organs of an 'old man kangaroo' (Brough-Smyth 1878, 179) and kangaroo pouches would be blown out (and not stuffed) to form a ball strong enough for throwing and kicking games. These were generally of a 'good size', elastic yet firm and strong at the same time.

A large ball made of paperbark secured with pandanus fibre twine, diameter 430 mm. Mornington Island, Qld. Queensland Museum.
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Other balls, for example in the Northern Territory, were made from paperbark secured with string, and used in a throwing or ‘keep aloft’ game, or from grass secured with string and then covered with beeswax and used in a game of football. These may have been slightly smaller; the former have been compared to a tennis ball and the latter to a cricket ball.

String balls, made either by continuous wrapping or by wrapping the string around a core, are described for a number of areas. Horne and Aiston (1924, 36) describe a string ball used in the Lake Eyre region made by stuffing a net bag with grass, hair or fur to form a ball about four inches in diameter and used in a catching and throwing game, and S C Bowler found a football made from ‘opossum wool spun by gins’ used in the Bogan and Lachlan River areas of New South Wales. Much smaller, this ball was about one and a half inches (38 mm) in diameter. Similarly, Brough-Smyth records a game of football played in Victoria where a light and elastic ball is formed of the twisted hair of the opossum and a ball still remembered at Yuendumu was made of hairstring wound around a crumpled pith of leaves and stems of plants. Charles Mountford refers to a ‘string’ ball, yula, used around the middle of the century by the Adnyamathanha men and boys of the Flinders Ranges for kicking and bouncing but later a better informant, Annie Coulthard (Tunbridge and Coulthard 1985, 50), had no recollection of such a ball and suggests that this may have in fact been a ‘normal ball of string’ frequently made of possum fur and rolled into a ball as it was spun.

... the Larrekya of Part Darwin [played with] small bags stuffed with fur, the scrotum of a kangaroo being often used for the purpose...
Herbert Basedow 1925, 77.

This game was recalled by the older male subjects. It involved two teams which were formed by generation moieties [described] ... The number of players was flexible but usually equal. The playing field was any cleared open space, open a creek bed. A ball (purija) was constructed out of hairstring with the inside containing crumpled pith, the stem and leaves of small soft plants and shrubs ... One informant confirmed that the game was played by males who had reached puberty. Another informant remembers some males playing in the single men’s camp, a place where only initiated men were permitted. The game involved keeping the ball away from team member to team member. Although the ball was also sometimes thrown, it is not clear whether rules existed governing handling the ball. The opposing team would attempt to intercept any passes in order to gain possession of the ball. Although no mention of scoring was made the final outcome did involve winners and losers. The Warlipiri word jija-mi means to be overwhelmed by, lose to, beaten by or succumb to something. The winners often refer to their victory, according to the resident linguist, as ‘we ate them’. Most of the informants stressed the aspects of fun and the amount of laughter going on during the game. One man described how the ground would be made soft by so many people playing for many hours, and added that the game was played ‘when the fresh grass came’, ie springtime.
Yuendumu, NT. Walbiri people.
Maria Miller 1983, 78.

... the children make believe to play cricket with a ball worlds away from a sphere (for it is none other than a pandanus drupe), and a bat of any waddya.
Dunk Island, Qld.
Edward Banfield 1911, 265.
A ball made of kangaroo skin, called a Buqunjii was sewn with tendon, and stuffed with grass, and used in a game now described. It was not as big as our football. Teams from other tribes would compete, and the number on each side varied up to eight. The rule was to run as far as possible with the ball towards a pole stuck in the ground, without being touched by the other side. Immediately a runner was touched, he had to throw the ball up and away from him, for his mates to pick up. If a man got a clear run to the post, he'd pull it up, and a mark would be cut on it. Then a fresh start would be made. The game was often played till sunset. Onlookers used to mark their applause by calling Ei! Ei! Southeast Qld. Jagara people.
Lindsay Winterbotham 1957, 123.

In the Miriam ball game the players stand in a circle and sing the following kai wad, ball song:

Kai tapitari Ball hit.
Kai tapitari Ball strike.
Abu kak kai o! Fall not ball!
Aimed kai kai o! Throw not ball!

As soon as they begin to sing one player strikes up the ball with his hard towards another player, who in his turn hits up the ball, and so on, keeping time to the rhythm of the music. The song is repeated as long as the game lasts. Should anyone let the ball fall to the ground, he is jeered at. According to one account, the game is properly played by two sides. Formerly they used for this game the thick, oval, deep red fruit of the kai tree ... which is quite light when dry; this fruit, which has a tough rind, varies from about 6 to 7 cm ... in length. At the present time they generally use a hollow cubical ball ... made of pandanus or coco-nut palm leaves. This ball was introduced by South Sea men and is a common Polynesian toy; the names kokan (W) and kai (E) prove that it is a loan object. It varies in size from about 35 to 53 mm in diameter, an average size being 45 mm; one oblong example measures 55 by 95 mm.
Torres Strait Islands.
Alfred Haddon 1912, 313.

In the Torres Strait Islands, balls were made by weaving pandanus strips to form hollow cubes or cylinders, also used in a catching and throwing game. These were apparently preceded by the fruit of the kai tree and are still named both for this fruit and for the song which originated with this game. For catching games, the seeds of the Macrozamia macdonnelli were used by the Aranda in the Finke River area of Central Australia, and zamia and pandanus seeds were used by Melville and Bathurst Islanders.

Three balls woven from pandanus leaf strips using a three dimensional plaiting technique to form hollow cubes (or cylinders). Used for a children's game of catch in Torres Strait.
National Museum of Australia.

Bat and ball games have been described for Dunk Island in northern Queensland, for the Tiwi of Bathurst Island, and in the Meda district of northwestern Australia. Prior to 1911, Edward Banfield (1911, 265) found the children of Dunk Island using the pandanus 'drupes' in a game of cricket with a bat made of 'any waddy', and a ball that was 'worlds away from a sphere'. A similar game was played in the Meda district using pandanus fruit and flat pieces of wood that resembled cricket bats, and on Bathurst Island Zamia seeds (Cycas media) were batted back and forth using the palm of the hand 'after the style of a modern game of tennis' (Basedow 1925, 77).

Finally, there are two types of balls that appear in museum collections but descriptions for their use have not been found. These are the emu-feather balls from the Cooper Creek region of South Australia (collected between 1890 and 1905), now at the South Australian Museum, and a small round ball of wax cement from the Kimberley, collected near the mouth of the Prince Regent River area in 1897, now at the Australian Museum.
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A kind of hand-ball is practised on Bathurst Island. The seeds of the zamia (Cycas media) take the place of a small ball. Two lads stand facing each other and hit the seed to and fro with the palms of their hands, after the style of a modern game of tennis. On the Victoria River, the children made similar use of the green seed capsules of the cotton-tree ... in the Meda district of northwestern Australia, players at the same game employed flat pieces of wood resembling cricket bats, the balls being fashioned out of the woody fruits of the pandanus.
Herbert Basedow 1925, 77.

A kind of native hockey was played in the south long before the advent of the whites. A meetcha (red gum nut) was used as the ball, and a piece of wood with a crooked root formed the hockey stick. The stick was generally bent into shape with the aid of fire. This game was called by various dialectic names: Meetcha boma (nut striking) Perth; deelagut or meetchalan York; meetcha toodeet; Out kambong (nut game or play) Fremantle, Rockingham; boooloolsl weebbin Albany; nandap toodeet and out Murray, are some of the native equivalents for the game of hockey. It resembles closely the Southern Irish game of 'hurler' and like that game, the native meetcha boma always ended in a general fight with the sticks ... The game was often played from morning till night and resumed again next day. Barreegap, three miles west of Manura, was a famous playing ground, and the fishing season in jilba (spring time) was the time chosen to play a big game, as all the natives from all the outlaying tribes were then assembled ...
Southwestern Australia.
Daisy Bates MS 365-36/90.

FOOTBALL
Games where the ball was kicked, and either kept aloft without the use of the hands or kicked and then intercepted with the hands appear to have been played throughout Australia (though possibly not in Queensland). The 'football' games of Victoria appear to have enlisted large numbers of players, from fifty to as many as two hundred and included both sexes and young and old in some areas (Beveridge 1889, 45). The ball in this case was not large, about the size of an orange, and two teams usually divided on the basis of totemic group would attempt to intercept a ball after it was 'drop-kicked' (with the instep). These games could be won or lost on the basis of how often the ball would be caught, or how far and how often the ball could be sent, where 'the person who sends it the highest is considered the best player and has the honour of burying it in the ground till required the next day' (Dawson 1881, 85).
Robert Brough-Smyth (1878, 178) added that the tallest men, those who are able to spring to the greatest heights, had the best chance and that these leaps could achieve a height of five feet or more off the ground. Daisy Bates found this game, using the same method of dropping and

One of five emu feather balls collected ca 1890 and 1905 from the Cooper Creek area.
South Australian Museum.
kicking with the instep, played throughout southwest Australia. In New South Wales, along the Bogan and Lachlan River areas, a small possum wool-string ball was used by children in a kicking game where the object was to keep the ball aloft. Here, children played as a group rather than in teams and the individual who could most often intercept the ball with a kick before it touched the ground was considered the best player.

THROWING AND PURSUIT GAMES

Games where the ball was thrown rather than kicked — to keep it in the air as long as possible or to keep it from the other players — appear to have been played more widely in New South Wales and Queensland but were also played in the other regions along with football games. A common form of this type of ball play followed the rules of ‘keep-away’ and was played with two teams where the ball was thrown from one player to the next in an attempt to keep the other side from intercepting it. Roth (1902a, 508) describes a game in the northwest central region of Queensland that was locally described as ‘kangaroo play’ because players would be obliged to leap, sometimes to great heights, in order to intercept and redirect the ball while it was still off the ground, their movements resembling those of the kangaroo. In New South Wales and southeast Queensland women would join in (Parker 1905, 179; Petrie 1904, 109) and in Victoria women as well as children would play when a number of people were gathered. This game is still remembered at Yuendumu in the Northern Territory, although here it was played only by males who had reached puberty. Here the ball was made out of hairstring wrapped around the crumpled leaves and stems of plants. These high-spirited games could last for hours and in some cases even days, the players seemingly inexhaustible.

Other ball-throwing games were played in circle formation. These could also become quite lively, such as a game observed by W G Stretton (1893, 244) on the Gulf of Carpentaria, named bowitjee (going about), where a small ball of paperbark would be passed very rapidly from player to player with ‘a terrific yell of derision’ greeting those who let it drop. In Torres Strait this game would be played by children with hollow lightweight balls woven of pandanus strips that were passed to the rhythm of a special ‘ball song’, again with jeers directed at the clumsy. Juwarlarai men and women on the Narran River in New South Wales played a circle game where the ‘totemic’ group that controlled the ball played at the centre, throwing a kangaroo skin ball into the air and attempting to retain control of it by catching it. Should any of the players from the group at the periphery catch the ball, places would be exchanged. The winning group was that which retained the ball the longest. Simple throwing and catching games have also been described as a game played by women in Victoria (Brough-Smyth 1878, 178) and by children (using a net bag stuffed with grass, hair or fur) in the Lake Eyre region (Horne and Aiston 1924, 36).

HOCKEY

Games using a ball and a stick, with or without goals, are described by several writers including Daisy Bates (nd MS 365-36/90) as a ‘kind of"
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hockey and were played extensively in the southwest region of Western Australia and throughout the Torres Strait Islands. In the former region, the ball was made of red gum nut and the stick was formed from a crooked root through a process of heating and bending over a fire. In this game, many groups would gather at a designated playing ground and an elaborate game, with teams playing for goals, would be played often 'from morning till night and resumed the next day'. In Torres Strait, a variation of this game (but without goals) would be played on a stretch of sand with a wooden ball and a 'roughly made bat or club', usually a piece of bamboo cut with a grip (Haddon 1912, 314). Sir O W Brierly (Moore 1979, 205) also describes a variety of this game for Cape York played by men using a 'round ball which grows in the scrub which they call Koie and strike ... with crooked sticks'. A somewhat different variation was played in the Bouli district of Queensland, described by N W Thomas (1906, 140) as a game that combined the hockey-like interception and redirection of the ball (in this case a 'bowling' stone) with the action of bowling, a 'curious game' with each side alternating in bowling stones that the other side would attempt to intercept with their sticks.

BOWLING OR ‘JEU DE BOULES’

In the Lake Eyre region of South Australia and the Warrina region of Victoria, a men’s game has been described that does not seem to have occurred elsewhere in Australia. However, throwing balls along a playing field to combat the moves of an opposing team has counterparts in early

A game of ball-playing was a favourite pastime of the Victorian tribes ... The ball used by the former [Worjobaluk] was made of strips of opossum pelt rolled tightly round a piece folded up and covered with another bit sewn tightly with sinews. The ball used by the Kurnai was the scrotum of an 'old man' kangaroo, stuffed tightly with grass. This was called Tartu jinua. The Wurrungjeri called their ball, which was like that of the Worjobaluk, manger. In playing this game the two sides were the two classes, two totems, or two localities ... Each side had a leader, and the object was to keep the ball from the other side as long as possible, by throwing it from one to the other. Such a game might last for hours. The Ngarriny played with a ball made of opossum pelt, and when many people were present the women and children took part in the game.

Vic.
Alfred Howitt 1904, 770.

The females also have a game of ball, but it is not played in the same manner as that of the males ... One throws the ball, and another catches it.

Vic.
Robert Brough-Smyth 1878, 178.

One game resembled hockey. It was played with a short narroch stick with a round burnt root at the end. The ball was also made from a root by being rounded, covered with clay and hardened in the fire. The game was played by sides of no particular number. A player when tired took a rest and was replaced by anyone else who liked to do so. The game seemed to have no particular time limit but continued until all were tired. This game was played in fits, sometimes becoming so popular that it was played every day by everyone for a week.

Bremer Bay, WA. Wiradjuri people.
Ethel Hassell and DS Davidson 1936, 686.

The most energetic of these games is a kind of hockey, shinny or shinnyich is played everywhere. It is called kekan in Mabuiag, which is also the name of the ball itself. The ball is made of wood and varies from about 55 to 60 mm in

Two balls from Mungeranie, in the Lake Eyre region of South Australia. They are made by burning gypsum in the fire, reducing it to a chalky substance which is then mixed with water, rolled and allowed to harden. These are between 1¾ inches and 2 inches (50 mm), somewhat smaller than those described by Horne and Aiston for men's bowling games but too large for children's spinning games. Collected by George Horne in the 1920s.

National Museum of Australia.
diameter and 3 ½ to 4 oz in weight, the largest being 78 mm and 10 oz, it is struck with a roughly made bat or club, buisain, dabi (W), which is usually a piece of bamboo, varying from 60 to 85 in length, on which a grip is cut. The game is played over a long stretch of sand beach, there are two sides and each player has a stick, but so far as I could discover there were no goals or rules. The game is very ‘fast’ and causes intense excitement and a tremendous noise; it is not without an element of danger as the heavy ball is hit with extreme vigour.

Torres Strait Islands.
Alfred Haddon 1912, 312.

The Lake Eyre tribes make three different styles of ball for playing ... A third type of ball is made for the use of men. This is as nearly round as possible, and is usually about three and a half inches in diameter. They are of gypsum, sandstone, mud, or almost any material that is easy to work. To play with these the players line up on each side of a dry clay-pan in any number, the only consideration is that the opposing sides are about equal. Each party then throws the balls along the ground to the other side, the aim being to break up the opponent’s ball by hitting it when it is moving; a lot are cannoned out of play to the sides. These are sometimes left until the stock of balls is getting used up, but often they are retrieved by the small boys and put into play again. The game is fascinating and is played for hours, usually until the balls left are too few to cause any excitement. The game is then dropped and the balls usually left on the playground. They are so easy to make that it is not considered worth while to carry them away. These balls are called koolchee.

George Horne and George Aiston 1924, 35.

The players line up on opposite sides and bowl the balls across, the object being both to get their own ball across and to stop the balls of the opposite side from coming over. Each player or group of players colour their balls, some with ashes, which gives a bluish grey colour, or with red or yellow ochre. The game is played until most of the balls are

Greece and Rome and is still played in southern France with what has been described as a ‘mild fanaticism’ (Grunfeld 1975, 187). There are of course essential differences. The jeu de boules of the French involves two teams (of two or three but no more than four players) who will attempt to toss or roll their balls to land nearest to a ‘target’ ball (which can be in turn knocked to a more preferable position by an oncoming ball). Should an opponent’s ball be positioned too close to the target, skilled players may attempt to dislodge it by aiming directly for the enemy ball. In the game played by the Lake Eyre people, as described by Horne and Aiston in 1924 (35–36), two opposing teams would attempt to bowl their balls across to the other side, the object being to get the most number of balls to the other side and at the same time preventing the opposing team from getting theirs across by using these balls to destroy or deflect the oncoming balls. In both cases, the game ends when the balls have been exhausted, though in central Australia the balls were often brought back into play by small boys hovering at the periphery and here play would last for hours. Near Warrina, a variation was recorded where the bowler would attempt to strike the ball of the opposing player, returning to a designated point if he missed or bowling again if he were successful.

In France, the playing field can be described upon any level ground surface, sometimes without regard for pedestrians or motorists. The balls used here are made of iron and are about three inches in diameter (76 mm) with incised linear motifs allowing them to be readily identified. In the Lake Eyre district the playing field was the ‘clay-pan’, a surface formed of a mixture of sand and clay. These were actually small lagoons that, when it rained in any amount, would fill with water that would evaporate to leave a smooth hard playing surface (provided that no animals walked on the surface as it dried). This playing surface was also used for spinning similar but smaller balls made of gypsum and in a game of playing sticks to be described later. The balls could be easily made from any number of materials, including burnt gypsum, sandstone, mud, or even stones. Ideally, they would be marked with ashes (giving them a blue-grey appearance) or with red or yellow pigments. At the end of play most balls would have been destroyed and the few remaining balls would generally be abandoned.

SPINNING GAMES

Toys that spin are one of the many ingenious extensions of the impulse to make the inanimate move in unexpected ways: to send a pointed stick hopping along the ground, to skip a pebble across the surface of water, to circle a crooked root in the air. Spinning toys are as ancient as human play and they are to be found throughout the world. In fact, the top was recommended to the parents of Roman children by their statesman, Cato, who pointed out that such a toy was far more suitable for children than the rolling of dice (Grunfeld 1975, 175).

Once set in motion, spinning toys appear to acquire a life of their own, hence the notion of a ‘sleeping’ top. This is particularly apparent in the great care taken by the Murray Island men of Torres Strait to preserve the ‘life’ of the top by sheltering it from the wind during their great top-spinning matches earlier this century, particularly when it
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appeared to falter and 'die' (Haddon 1901, 40). Adding to this sense of the animate, a hollow top can be made to hum by simply piercing holes in its side.

In Australia, a variety of spinning balls and tops were recorded and have been collected, particularly for the Lake Eyre region, Queensland and Torres Strait. These include spinning balls (round and without spindles) and a variety of tops made of various materials and propelled in different ways. Most are spun between the fingers or the open palms of both hands, but some are spun with the aid of a string wrapped around the peg and pulled away sharply.

In the Lake Eyre region spinning balls (and tops) were made out of burnt gypsum mixed with water as described earlier for the balls used by men in the bowling game. These were generally smaller than the bowling balls, only about one and a half inches in diameter (38 mm), and used by children in contests to see whose ball could spin the longest on the water-smoothed clay-pan. Horne and Aiston found the spinning motion to be initiated by holding the ball with the first two fingers and giving it a sharp twist. Examples of burnt gypsum spinning balls from the Lake Eyre region can be found in the collections of the National Museum of Australia and the South Australian Museum. The latter also holds a number of burnt gypsum spinning balls from Montecollina in South Australia as well as one from Arnhem Land.

A ball of similar size was played with by adults in the north-west-central area of Queensland. Here contests would be somewhat more elaborate, with two or three men and women playing at a time for prizes as small as a 'wax-match or two'. Sometimes, these contests would involve the lookers to the extent of taking sides to back the best spinner. According to Walter Roth (1902a, 509) these balls were fashioned from 'lime ashes, sand, clay, and sometimes hair, rolled into shape, either between the hands or in the folds of a blanket'. Roth observed that these smashed by colliding with each other. Playing balls are made from many materials, some are only round water washed pebbles.

Lake Eyre region, SA.

George Aiston nd.

I have in my possession two balls made of granite, which by much use have become quite black. They are respectively of the following sizes: Diameter, 2¼ inches, and 2½ inches, weight, 8¾ ozs, and 7¾ ozs. They were obtained from the natives near Warrina on the Overland Telegraph line, and were used in playing a game something like bowls, only that the bowler of one ball attempted to strike the other ball, no matter how far distant. If he accomplished this he had the right to bowl again from a stated point or mark, when his opponent followed. Should there be a miss, the first again returned to point; should he likewise miss the other then bowled from a point. I did not ascertain the name of this game. These stone balls were also used in a spinning game, the winner being he who can make his ball spin the longest, as boys do their tops.

Warrina, SA.

T Worsnop 1897, 165.

Other ball games are more like top-spinning, which is also found in parts of Queensland, the top being a gourd or plate of beeswax. A round ball is made of line, ashes, clay, or some similar material, and spun between the fore and middle fingers, the object of the game being to keep it up as long as possible. Another form of spin-ball or top was made of a gourd through which were passed two strings, which were then knotted; like the slate discs used by English boys, the ball was spun by twisting the string, and then putting tension on it with the hands.

N W Thomas 1906, 139.

Natives are fond of spinning any suitable objects which fall into their hands: small pebbles, gall-nuts, and the larger variety of conical and bell-shaped eucalyptus fruits are all made to spin upon a level surface just to amuse the children.

Herbert Basedow 1925, 83.
Spin ball in the north-west-central districts is a round ball of about 1 to 1½ inches in diameter made of lime, ashes, sand, clay, and sometimes hair, rolled into shape, either between the hands or in the folds of a blanket, and subsequently baked, thus making it smooth and hard; it may be subsequently painted with red or yellow ochre. The ball is spun by being pressed between the fore and middle fingers ... upon either a patch of smooth hard ground, or more usually upon a flat board, sheet of kerosine tin, etc. Played by men and women, two or even three at a time, the one whose ball spins longest wins. The game can also be played by the participants taking sides, each backing individual members against its adversary. It would appear to have been introduced into these parts from the Lower Diamantina River, within but very recent years, coming up the Georgina via Bedourie. It does not seem to have reached, or been known to, the Cloncurry blacks in 1896. [1897, 130] ... The spin-ball is called jil-lor-a at Boula, po-po-jo at Glenormiston and Roxburgh, paa-cho paa-cho in the Kalkadoon country, and un-ni-dup-it-up-ja at Headingly and Lake Nash. Qld. Walter Roth 1902a, 509; 1897, 130.

At the locality mentioned Blanchewater I saw one [top moulded out of clay and provided with a peg] spun by a lubra remain rotating, or as boys would call it 'asleep' for four minutes, and even this period I believe can be exceeded. SA.
Edward Stirling 1896, 86.

The Yantowanna, Wongkanguru, and other tribes of the Cooper Creek region are very clever at moulding tops out of clay, with real pegs, upon which the tops revolve. These tops are undoubtably an indigenous invention. The spinning is usually accomplished by rubbing the toy between the palm of both hands.
Cooper Creek region, SA.
Edward Stirling 1896, 86.

A spinning ball made of 'clay' with its mat of paperbark. To the left is the sand which is sprinkled on the mat to facilitate the spinning. From the Diamantina River area of Queensland. Ball: 2¾ inches (58 mm); mat: 285 mm square.
Queensland Museum.

Two spinning tops, kula, made from burnt gypsum that has been mixed with water, shaped, and pierced with a wooden spindle as it hardened, diameter 70 mm and 40 mm. Collected by George Horne ca 1920 in the Lake Eyre region of South Australia.
National Museum of Australia.

balls were generally spun on either a patch of smooth hard ground, much as the gypsum balls of the Lake Eyre region, or on a flat board or a sheet of kerosine tin. Here the ball would be held between the fore and middle fingers (the same as the Lake Eyre balls). The Australian Museum and the Queensland Museum hold examples of clay balls from the Georgina and the Diamantina River regions of Queensland. In both these areas

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COMMUNITY PLAY

The Lake Eyre tribes make three different styles of ball for playing. One is a small round ball, usually about one and a half inches in diameter, and is made from burnt gypsum mixed up with water. It is made for the children. To play with it, it is gripped in the first two fingers of the hand and given a twist, causing it to spin. The game is played by several players at once, and the one whose ball spins the longest is the winner. In this game a piece of hard clay ground is used... A larger style used only by the women is made slightly flat on one side with a short piece of stick inserted to make a peg. This is made to spin in the same manner as the smaller [children's] ball. Sometimes two women will play against one another, each spinning her ball into a pirrha (bowl), and the one whose ball keeps up the longest is the winner. A variation is sometimes played in which the two are made to spin in the same pirrha. There is then a lot of excitement as the two spinning balls collide with one another. If the pirrha is smooth the balls are knocked up the sides and then seem to swoop down at each other into the hollow.

Lake Eyre region, SA.
George Horne and George Aiston 1924, 35.

In the 1922 silent film [Native Australia] ... two women from the eastern shores of Lake Eyre are seen at play. They fashioned two tops out of kopi (clay) which had the size and shape of table-tennis balls. After the tops hardened, the women (according to the caption in the film) played 'primitive roulette, the ball that spins the longest wins'. The coolamon (curved dish) which is normally used for carrying babies, water or food in desert areas was used as the spinning surface in this game.

Lake Eyre region, SA.
Maria Miller 1983, 17.

These stone balls were also used in a spinning game, the winner being he who can make his ball spin the longest, as boys do their tops.

Warrina, SA.
T Worsnop 1897, 165.

A clay top from Lake Callabonna, SA.
South Australian Museum.

Wangganguru woman demonstrating the position of the fingers for spinning the ball. Mungeranie, SA, ca 1920.
Photograph: George Aiston. Reproduced from Horne and Aiston 1924, 35.
I also saw them spinning water-worn, round pebbles on the bottoms of inverted 'billy-cans', but I saw none of the beautifully balanced tops moulded out of clay and provided with a peg which the natives of the north-east of South Australia proper (Blanchewater) spin in competition against one another, on some smooth surface such as a piece of tin. Central/South Australia
Edward Stirling 1896, 86.

Small cone-shells are spun by the children by twirling them in the usual way between the thumb and forefinger. Torres Strait Islands.
Alfred Haddon 1912, 314.

This activity, played with the woody seed capsule from the Bloodwood tree, could be played either as a game or a pastime. The informants were middle or older generation males and females who played the game when they were young, having learnt it from their elders. This game is still played by these people today. When the women play they bite the stem off the gum nut (often the stem is not straight which is not conducive to spinning) and then proceed to spin it, either alone or in groups. The spinning is accomplished by holding the opened end of the gum nut between the thumb and index finger, and then snapping the fingers together a few inches above the playing surface. This is usually a flat section of ground, a smooth rock or even a coolamon. The object of the activity is to try and get the gum nut to spin for a long time on its closed end. This activity was popular during the heat of the day as it helped while away the hours in the shade. There seemed to be no restrictions on the numbers of participants and the company was sometimes mixed. The spinning gum nut was often used to entertain toddlers. During one excursion the translator, a young Warlpiri woman who herself was unfamiliar with the activity, asked an older subject who the winner of the game would be. The response was simply 'no winner, it's just for fun'. During the field-work, no young people were seen playing this game.
Yuendumu, NT. Walbiri people.
Maria Miller 1983, 70.

regions, particular shells would lend themselves as spinning toys. Alfred Haddon (1912, 314) found Torres Strait Islander children spinning cone shells between thumb and forefinger, much as stones were spun.

More elaborate spinning toys took the form of flattened balls or discs with pegs inserted as spindles. Tops made of gypsum and used by the women of the Lake Eyre region have been described by Horne and Aiston in 1924 and have been featured in a 1922 film entitled Native Australia, produced by B Nicholls and Kodak Limited, though here they are described as kopi or clay tops.8 Although spun in the same way as the children's balls (but slightly larger), these were flattened at the top (sometimes only slightly) with a peg inserted at the centre. The spinning surface for these was the woman's all-purpose carrying trough and the contest was to see whose toy would spin the longest. Sometimes two would be set to spin in the same container much to the excitement of onlookers as they swooped up and down the sides, often colliding in the end. Examples of these, collected by Horne, are now held by the National Museum of Australia with similar examples in the South Australian Museum. To complete the record for these gypsum balls and tops, George Aiston took a series of photographs of Wanggangu women at Mungeranie in order to illustrate how these were made and spun (Horne and Aiston 1924, fig 22–26). The extent to which clay was used or whether it may have been confused with these burnt gypsum tops is unclear. However, both Herbert Basebow and Edward Stirling refer to clay tops for the Cooper Creek region in the northeast of South Australia.

Tops were also made from a variety of seed capsules of unripe fruits, sometimes with little modification in cases where the stem would serve as the spindle. On Dunk Island, the seed capsule of the gulong (Eucalyptus robusta) was twirled between the thumb and index finger (Banfield 1911, 264). Similarly, in southwest Australia, the red gum nut was used and in the Northern Territory, at Yuendumu, Walbiri children and adults would spin the 'gum nut' from the bloodwood tree. Here, still played, is a man's version and a woman's version of a spinning game where the women bite the stem and spin the nut with the open end up and the

Two Wanggangu women showing how gypsum tops are spun in the wooden bowl [pirha].
Mungeranie, SA, ca 1920.
Photograph: George Aiston. Reproduced from Horne and Aiston 1924, 35.
men wedge a straight thin twig into the opening and rub it with both hands. Onlookers would sometimes attempt to predict whose gum nut would spin the longest (Miller 1983, 71).

The Umbila people of Stewart River on Cape York Peninsula made tops from the seedheads of *Hibiscus tiliaceus* and similar tops were made both on Cape York and in Torres Strait using the Queensland bean (*Enuada scandens*) (Thomson 1983, 18; Haddon 1912, 314). Both of these would be pierced and wooden spindles inserted. Alternatively, on Murray Island, the small fruit of the *pewar* and also of the *zon* tree would be made into tops in much the same way with sticks from 100 to 120 millimetres long inserted as spindles, and on Dunk Island the unripe fruit of the *kirra-kul* (*Eupomatia laurina*) would serve the same purpose (Banfield 1911, 264).

In the north Queensland rainforest a spinning top used only by men was made from a small gourd (*Benincasa vacua*), both as a 'silent' and a humming toy, though piercing a hole in the side to make it hum was felt to be a later development. Again, the top was made by pushing a stick through the centre and it was spun between the palms of the hand.

Two tops, made by pushing a spindle of wood through the centre of a hibiscus seed, 125 mm by 28 mm. Gan-ganda [Yintinga, Yintiingga] people, Cape York. Collected by Donald Thomson in 1929. 
*Museum of Victoria.*

Front: A Tiwi top from Melville/Bathurst Island, NT, named kar(a)katu and made from the seed of the Mariponga tree pierced with a mangrove wood spindle. These were used in adult spinning competitions. Back: A top made from beeswax and decorated with red ochre. Made by Brian Njinaawanga, Rembarnga people [Ranjbarngu] (Balangara clan), at Botgadi Outstation, near Maningrida, NT. *Northern Territory Museum of Arts and Sciences.*

A top made from the 'Queensland bean' (*Enuada scandens*), with a wooden spindle, 176 mm by 48 mm. Belonged to a small Umbila [Ompela] girl, Stewart River, east Cape York, Qld. Collected in 1929 by Donald Thomson. 
*Museum of Victoria.*

The *pewar kelap* of Mer ... is made from the fruit of the *pewar* which has a diameter of about 20–25 mm, the sticks being 10–12 cm long. A similar top is made of the dried fruit of the *zon* tree (*Thepetia papuana*). These tops are spun with the fingers and resemble in this respect the tee-totum, but strictly speaking the latter is a four-sided or faceted top used in games of chance. These tops were simple toys for children and never attained the importance of the Miriam stone tops.

Murray Island, Torres Strait.
Alfred Haddon 1912, 314.

A similar top but of larger size [than the seed top] is the unripe fruit of the *kirra-kul* (*Eupomatia laurina*), which resembles an obtuse peg-top, and is spun from the peg.
Dunk Island, Qld.
Edward Banfield 1911, 264.

The spin-top, made from a gourd, is of two varieties, both known as ngor-gor, the name of the gourd [1902 spelling ngor-go]. A stick is passed through, and fixed above and below with twine. It is used only by men and spun by twirling with the flats of the open hands. A string is never used to spin it. Furthermore, the hole at the side, to make it 'hum', was not originally placed there; it has only been introduced of late years.
North Qld.
Walter Roth 1900, 29

An undoubtedly indigenous form of spin-ball is, however, met with amongst the scrub-blacks of the Lower Tully River, made out of a gourd ... Two holes are drilled, on opposite sides of it, and through them an endless string is passed. A thumb is inserted at either end of the loop of string, and the 'ball' rotated over and over. The hands are then more extended, and the doubled string untwirls the ball; the hands are again approximated with the ball twirling in a reverse direction; and so it may be kept spinning for a long time. This particular toy is played with more often by women than by men. It is known among the local Mallanpara blacks as ngor-gor, after the name of the gourd.
North Qld.
Walter Roth 1902a, 509.
The manmandur of Cape Bedford is made by passing a small wooden splinter through a more or less flattened and circular plate of beeswax, and spinning it like an English boy would a tee-to-tum, by a rolling movement between the middle finger and thumb. Indeed, this method of spinning is adopted with the calyx-cups of the Sonneratia acida ... the Eucalyptus bicolor ... and other plants.

Qld.
Walter Roth 1902a, 310.

Two kinds of top spun by means of string were collected by us, the most common being the peg-top, which is also called the kolap. The form is variable, being either conical or biconical, the apex in the latter case is frequently truncate; the point is knob-like. It is made of enoa (Mimusops) wood. Three other specimens measure 70 by 40 mm, 77 by 39 mm, and 84 by 45 mm. Those which we obtained in Mer were introduced from Malabug where they were said to be native, but this is I think improbable. The form of some of them is like that of European peg-tops, others resemble the common Malay top (gasirir) which is found in the Malay Peninsula and throughout the East Indian Archipelago, but as the kolap is spun in the European way I think it must have been derived from European and not from Malayan sources.

Torres Strait Islands.
Alfred Haddon 1912, 316.

The proceedings opened with a kolap, or top-spinning match. Top-spinning was a great institution in Murray Island during the time of our stay there. On one occasion there were thirty tops spinning at the same time. The men sang songs, and there was great cheering-on of slackening tops, and shouting and jeering when one stopped. At the critical time, as a top was dying, great care was taken to shelter it from the wind so as to prolong its 'life' a few seconds longer. At one match we timed the four best tops, and found they span for [24–27 min] ... The tops are made of a fine-grained volcanic ash, and have the shape of a split-pea with a diameter of from about 4 to 7 1/2 inches. There is a long palm-wood stem. The flat upper surface

A toy made to spin when suspended. Plant fibre woven around wooden splints, 110 mm by 690 mm. Maningrida Arts and Crafts.

Northern Territory Museum of Arts and Sciences.

It was named by the Tully River people after the gourd itself, ngor-ngor (or ngor-go), and by the Cape Grafton people as bunhuj. The Australian Museum holds nine examples of these tops, five of which were collected in the Cairns region by Walter Roth who first described them in 1900. Others were collected near Mount Bellenden Ker and the Upper Barron River in the 1890s.

Walter Roth (1902a, 509) also described a spinning toy used more often by the women and also made from this gourd. This 'spinning ball', also named ngor-go, was made by drilling two holes at either side of the gourd through which an 'endless' string would be threaded, long enough to be held comfortably between both hands. The gourd was spun by winding the string tightly and then pulling the hands apart to unwind it. Two toys constructed on this same principle and spun by the same action have been collected from Kalumburu in the Kimberley and from Yirrkala in Arnhem Land. Made from wood (oval or oblong) in the 1970s, these toys each have two holes drilled at the centre to accommodate a loop of string which is, in the case of the Yirrkala toy, held between the thumb and the third finger.

Beeswax formed into a disc, around a spindle, would make a small top that was spun between the thumb and finger. Walter Roth described such tops for Cape York and he collected one example from the McIvor
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Bark spinning toy collected in 1974 at Kalumburu, WA, 67 mm by 39 mm. Western Australian Museum.

Wood spinning toy made from beach hibiscus wood and painted, fibre twine string. Made in 1978 at Yirrkala in Arnhem Land. James Cook University Material Culture Unit.

A spinning top made from the gourd Benincasa vacua, decorated with bands of red and white ochre and pierced to make it hum. The stick through the centre of the gourd has been secured with beeswax and fibre twine, 215 mm long, diameter 70 mm. Known by the Cape Grafton people as busbuja. Collected by Walter Roth prior to 1905 in the Cairns region. Australian Museum.
Spinning top, honey gum with wood spindle. Holroyd River, Qld. Australian Museum.

Beeswax and wood top. Weipa, Qld. Australian Museum.


River in the region of Cooktown, now at the Australian Museum. The Queensland Museum also holds similar tops from Weipa and Aurukun and more recently a single beeswax top, made at Borgadi near Maningrida, has been acquired by the Northern Territory Museum.

Children's tops in the Torres Strait Islands could also be spun with the aid of a string much like the European peg top. These were made of Wongai wood and were spun by wrapping the string around the stem and then pulling it sharply away. Alfred Haddon believed these to be imported due to their similarity to both European and Malay tops, though Torres Strait Islanders maintained these to be indigenous. Similar tops may also have been used on Cape York. Haddon collected several examples of these as well as a top made of a lead disc, probably a net weight, into which a cane tube was inserted with a wooden stick set inside the tube.

Finally, there are the Murray Island stone tops made by the men with elaborate care from volcanic rock. Here, top spinning achieved great heights and serious contests were held among men of all ages, sometimes with one side of the island competing with the other. This top was rounded in form with a flat upper surface that was usually decorated in colourful patterns. Great care was taken in making these as round as
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possible and protecting them in lined baskets when complete. Good hardwood spindles were prized and, although local palm-wood and old dugong harpoons could be used, the preferred hardwood, dab, was obtained by trade from Queensland. These tops would be set to spin on a hard surface, traditionally a piece of melon shell, but in later years fragments of porcelain dishes were substituted. The spinning motion which, for the very best tops, could last for more than twenty-five minutes was achieved by ‘slow, steady, sliding movements of the outstretched palms’ (Haddon 1901, 40). On one occasion, Haddon was able to watch thirty tops spinning at once.

In all, there are about sixty-five spinning toys, tops and balls in the collections of various Australian museums, primarily from the Lake Eyre region and from Cape York (with Haddon’s Torres Strait collection held by the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology in England). While many of these are children’s toys, a significant number were also used by adults.

Playing Sticks

Playing sticks account for one-third of the entire collection of Aboriginal toys in Australian museums. Like the boomerang, the playing stick caught the attention of the European observers although it did not hold it to the same extent. And, like a number of other bush toys, it is at once unprepossessing in appearance and yet able to perform a surprising performance upon release by the player. It was used primarily in a competitive game where the winner was judged on the distance he could throw the stick and the skill with which he could make it ricochet from the ‘take-off’ to achieve the maximum distance.

The form varies only slightly from region to region, indeed from continent to continent. Designed as a projectile toy, it has a long, slender and somewhat pliant shaft that terminates in an elongate knob at one end. This form allows the playing stick to travel great distances along the ground in a hopping or snaking motion following a calculated impact with a low bush or a grassy mound. These were generally about a metre long but a smaller stick of about one-third to one-half metre (of the same form) was also made in northern Queensland and New South Wales. This stick was designed to shoot into the air following impact with overhanging foliage while the longer stick would only travel along the ground. In Victoria, playing sticks could also be made from two pieces of wood though some people were not quite as efficient as those made from a single piece of wood: ‘not infrequently it is found convenient to fix a knob of hard, heavy wood to a suitable handle by splitting one end of the handle, and fastening it with gum and sinew to the knob. They are often broken when the thrower misses his aim; but it is easy to repair one by joining the handle to the knob with sinew and gum; and an instrument so made behaves nearly as well as one carved of a solid piece of wood’ (Brough-Smyth 1878, 35). These playing sticks, presumably an adaptation of the throwing club, appear to have been used solely for amusement and competitive throwing matches, primarily by men and boys, but also by children. There is, however, one reference (Dawson 1881, 86) to the use of this or a very similar stick in Victoria for throwing at birds (as well as in a game).

He was also allowed to watch the men throw the kukerra, or, as it is called in the north of Lake Eyre, kulchera, or in Victoria wit wit. This is made out of mulga and has one thickened end about nine inches long and an inch and a half in diameter. The other end is planed down with a stone knife so as to form a long slender pliant handle. A man takes this in his hand and throwing it quickly underarm, makes it strike a tussock or hard piece of ground from which it flies off like a torpedo except that the vibration of the handle or tail imparts a peculiar sinuous flight to the weapon.

Hermannsburg, NT.
Stanley Porteus 1931, 168.

Among the Dieri, Yantowannta, and Ngameni, principally, and to a less extent among the Arnumdra, Akuridja, and Kukata, a playing stick is found which is commonly known by the name of kukerra. Although a toy, the men only were observed to use it, not only to amuse the children but for the benefit of the whole camp. The kukerra is a slender, club-shaped stick made out of the mulga. Its length is about three feet six inches, of which the thickened end occupies something like nine inches; the head, ie the swollen portion, is up to an inch or slightly more in diameter, whilst the ‘stick’ is not thicker than an ordinary lead pencil; each end terminates in a blunt point. The Dieri kukerras are lighter and more slender than the
Arunrdta or Aluridja. The playing stick is seized at its thin end and, swinging it with a straight arm, it is made to strike a bush or tussock in front of the thrower; whence it bounds through the air in an inclined position, and, after striking the ground, glides along the surface in a snake-like manner.
Central Australia.
Herbert Basedow 1925, 82.

The far-far game: Kukara, of the Dieri Tribe, was taught to the Aranda ulbma [Finke and Ellery's Creek to near Henbury] and Loritja by two natives brought from Bethesda by the missionary Kempe. The two native names were Kalimama and Tekua. The Aranda now call the game, Kukara, and the Loritja, ukukara. It is very easy to play; in the middle of a clear hard patch of ground a row of bunches of grass are laid, through which the men and the boys, who take part in the game throw the kukara throwing club as far as possible, the player then runs after it and throws it back along the same course.
Central Australia.
Carl Strehlow 1907, 1029.

Perhaps the most curious toy of the Australian aboriginal is the wit-wit, or kangaroo rat. It is a piece of wood with a coned head and a long thin tail, not thicker than a pipe stem, twelve to twenty inches long. It weighs less than two ounces. The shorter form is thrown overhand, and in order to make it travel properly it is essential that it should be thrown through the top of a leafy bush some six feet high; it will then traverse an extraordinary distance. Mrs Stow informs me that a flight of 300 yards has been recorded. The larger form is thrown along the ground; Dr Roth says that it is thrown overhand, and Dawson agrees with this saying that it is whirled around the head; but Brough-Smyth says that it is thrown underhand, as the similar toy in Fiji is thrown. Brough-Smyth says that it was hurled against a hillock, the wit-wit being held lightly with the thumb and first two fingers, the others being slightly bent; the thrower turned his back on the mound; held the toy horizontally at a level with the forehead, and wheeling round, threw it.

The two most common types of playing sticks. Top: a typical playing stick made of a single piece of wood, generally about 1 metre long, but in areas of Queensland a shorter stick of the same form was made between 300 mm to about 500 mm. Below: In Victoria this same stick was made in two parts with the head attached to the stalk by way of resin and sinew, thus providing a re-usable head when the stick broke, as it often did.

Local names: kangaroo-rat, wit-wit (general accounts); kulchera, kuberra, gugura, kagura, kagana, kokkoro, kukara ukukara; wava (Central and South Australia, and the Lake Eyre region); boodhala; wak-wak; wit-wit; widji-widji (NSW/Murray Darling); murun murun, boom-bo, keem-po, jim-ba-do, mooro-roo, mooro minja, tirra, whit whit, kooker, yalma, ngii-ngoii stick (Queensland); wuwe whuitch, wet weet, watchweir, wet-weet, wa-woit, wich-wich, witchetty (Victoria); omater, aipersi lu, dukan (Torres Strait).

Their form, their unique flight path and the delight that was taken in demonstrating skill in the throwing of these playing sticks all attest to Roth's observation (1902a, 485) that 'toys, or specially manufactured articles, all present the peculiarity that the source of enjoyment consists in the particular form of motion which may be imparted to them'. The astonishing distance these sticks travelled along the ground, and the extent to which their hopping motion resembled the motion of a kangaroo rat in flight, prompted early writers to name the stick the 'kangaroo-rat'. The Reverend J G Wood (1800, 41) observed that 'when properly thrown, it looks just like a living animal leaping along, and those who have been accustomed to traverse the country say that its movements have a wonderful resemblance to the long leaps of a kangaroo-rat, fleeing in alarm, with its long tail trailing as a balance behind it'. Some described the playing stick as 'the most curious toy of the Australian Aboriginal' (Thomas 1906, 140) and as one of the 'most extraordinary instruments used by savages ... in some respects ... almost as interesting as the boomerang' (Brough-Smyth 1878, 352). The game has been described as 'mildly competitive' on Murray Island (Haddon 1912, 317), and 'highly exciting' in Victoria where Peter Beveridge (1889, 47) observed that while there was no doubt that 'this Wotchrie racing seems a simple enough kind of pastime when thus described on paper, still we have seen as much excited enthusiasm engendered by watching the fluctuating of the tiny hoppers as ere a rink of curling gave rise to on a well-frozen Scottish loch'.

A similar game was played by indigenous groups in many regions of the Pacific and North America (where in some regions it was dubbed the 'snow snake' game). As well, isolated occurrences have been recorded for South America and southeast Asia. D S Davidson (1936) studied the occurrence of this game in various areas of the world in order to explore the idea that the widespread appearance of the 'dart game' might be related to the diffusion of influences from one region to another. However, despite superficial similarities, he found enough variation to come to the conclusion that the independent invention of this game was a more likely
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possibility. At the time of Davidson's study he could only guess at the distribution of the game through Australia based on a scattering of references and a lack of detail therein. The detail has since been pulled together in the course of this survey. The distribution of these sticks has been more clearly set out based on a wider survey of early descriptions and on the provenance of playing sticks in Australian museum collections.

Davidson predicted that this game would probably have been played in most regions of Australia but not in the west and northwest of Australia and appearing in Western Australia only in the far southeast corner. Time seems to have borne this out with the exception of playing sticks collected from the eastern region of the Kimberley. Whether this game was developed independently in Australia or, as Davidson proposed, was brought in from Melanesia through Torres Strait, remains a mystery. That it was very popular and widely played is well established. How it spread and the extent to which it enjoyed cycles in popular play is less clear. For example, when men travelled from South Australia to the Balladonia region of Western Australia, 'it was said that the local tribes went wild about it and that it was a craze for sometime afterward,' Brough-Smyth (1878, 352) also inadvertently triggered a rekindled passion for the game in the 1880s at Coranderrk in Victoria when he asked to have the playing stick reproduced: 'I had an opportunity of seeing this missile used when I visited the Aboriginal Station at Coranderrk, on the 15th of January 1873. I had previously been making enquiries respecting the Weet-weet, and had asked one of the Aborigines to make me one; and as soon as the men saw the toy, the game of Weet-weet became once more popular, and several of them were provided with the instrument when I visited them.'

The use of the playing stick by children varies. Although the stick seems to have been used primarily by men in throwing competitions, it was also widely used by boys in less formal competitions. While Herbert Basedow (1925, 82) notes that 'although a toy, the men only were observed to use it, not only to amuse the children but for the benefit of the whole camp,' there are numerous references to boys using the playing stick in many areas. In Victoria and the Riverina, Beveridge (1889, 47) found that the game could be played 'by any number above one. Both sexes, from eight years of age and upwards, join in it.' And, in South Australia, Adnyamathanha girls in the northern Flinders Ranges occasionally played with these sticks although Mountford saw them used only by men and boys (Tunbridge and Coulthard 1985, 23).

Throwing the stick for distance competitions required great skill in order to make it travel without faltering at the outset or shattering the stem. To a passing observer (Stanbridge 1861, 297) it appeared that a player would 'take hold of the end, swing it over head, and dash it on the ground,' but the skill lay in the holding and the swinging, in the calculated 'dashing'; 'an awkward cast is certain to result in a broken toy' (Beveridge 1889, 47). Skilled players in Victoria, according to Robert Brough-Smyth, could make the stick travel 'easily 100, 150, and 190 yards' and in one instance, Brough-Smyth measured a distance of 220 yards. Peter Beveridge (1889, 47), also describing this game for Victoria and the Riverina, puts this distance closer to 'as much as four hundred yards'.

In Central Australia, where the game appears to have been played more formally and with greater numbers, players would stand at a downwards upon the hillock which he took care to have some six yards in front of him. A measured flight covered 220 yards. It does not traverse this distance without touching the ground, but ricochets again and again. Dawson tells us that it was also used for throwing at birds.

Sir, I think many Australians would be interested in the enclosed account of Weet Weet, an aboriginal toy used in a game once played along the south coast from Ballardina (Nullarbor Region, WA) to Port Phillip Bay, Victoria. I should imagine the art of weet weet throwing is now lost ... Can any of your readers throw further light on the matter, particularly as to whether the game is played anywhere today in Australia? Letter to the Editor of Walkabout. 
Claude Pressie 1955, 45.

In Australia, a game which appears to be basically similar to Polynesian teka is generally spoken of by Europeans as the weet-weet or kangaroo rat ... We have very little information concerning the playing of the game in Australia. There are only a few accounts of its presence, and these, for the most part, are not given in detail. It is impossible, therefore to mention more than the main features which seem to involve the throwing of the darts to strike a hillock or other obstacle, thence to bound along the ground for the greatest possible distance. There is no report of prepared courses nor of artificial mounds for the take-off of the dart ... The total distribution of the game in Australia cannot be given with certainty.

D S Davidson 1936, 109.

Another game played on the clay-pan by the men is with the playing-stick called by the Wonkongara kalchera. This is the wit-wit of the 'Victorian tribes. In this game the blacks throw the kalchera with an underhand throw through a bush so that it will ricochet off the hard ground. The one whose kalchera travels the furthest is the winner of the bout, and red, yellow, black and white kalchera are employed, so that each man may know his own. The game is played until
all the *kula* are broken. The clay-pans form really small lagoons, the soil being a mixture of clay and sand. They fill up with every rain exceeding half an inch, and if no animals go into them for water, the top, when they dry up, is as smooth as asphalt. The games and trials of skill are commonest when men from other parts visit the place.

Lake Eyre region, SA.

George Horne and George Aiston 1924, 37.

*Mookoolah* are plain waddies used in war and for killing game; a smaller kind called *boodthul* are thrown for amusement. For *gurril* *boodthul*, if a bush is not at hand, a bushy branch of a tree is stuck up. The men arm themselves with small *boodthuls*, or miniature waddies, then stand a few feet behind the bush, which varies from five to eight feet or so in height at competitions. They throw their *boodthuls* in turn; these have to skim through the top of the bush, which seems to give them fresh impetus instead of slackening them. The distance they go is the test of a good thrower; over three hundred yards is not unusual. As practice in this game is kept up, the young men hold their own. There is another throwing stick somewhat larger than the *gurril* *boodthul*, which only weighs about three ounces, and is about a foot in length. The other stick is thrown to touch the ground, then bound on, sometimes making one high long leap, sometimes a series of jumps, as a flat pebble does when thrown up along the water in the game children call 'ducks and drakes'.

Narraw River, NSW. Juwarabai people.

Catherine L Parker 1905, 124, 128.

The game began in this manner: the throwers, each holding one or more of these toys in their hands, stood in a group near a small rise or hillock in the grassy ground in front of the schoolhouse. They threw in turn, and carefully noted where each instrument fell. The manner of throwing the toy was very curious and interesting. The native, having carefully looked at the hillock, walked about six or eight yards from it, and then turned his back towards it. In the hollow of the palm of his right hand he placed the thin end of the *weet-weet,*

A variety of playing sticks from central Australia, ranging in length from 600 mm (top) to 1040 mm (bottom), and in weight from 70 grams to 476 grams (unusually heavy). Some of these have been decorated with incised linear motifs and the centre stick has been decorated with a burning technique. The second from the bottom has an unusual head shape, and the stick nearest the bottom, collected by Herbert Baseow, is quite unusual. Whether these heavier sticks can achieve the same flight pattern, or the long distances of the lighter sticks has not been established.

*National Museum of Australia.*

Two men from the Lake Eyre region demonstrating the position taken prior to throwing the playing sticks, ca. 1920.

COMMUNITY PLAY

designated place to begin the game, each holding several sticks. At Lake Eyre, individual sticks would be coloured red, black or white for ready identification. Here and in Victoria teams were organised along totemic or tribal distinctions. In other areas it appears that individuals competed against each other. One game among the Dieri had the players eliminated from the best to the last through a series of throws where the first player to gain the greatest distance ‘won’ with the remaining players throwing again. With each series of throws, the best would be eliminated leaving only the weakest player at the last. With good-natured laughter, he would be told to sleep until his body was strengthened (Berndt 1953, 184). There is no evidence that gambling on the best play was practised in Australia although this game did provide a ready venue for gambling in North America.

The take-off target was usually a grassy mound (or hillock) or low-growing bushes, but even hard ground and artificial targets would serve. This impact, as well as turning the missile knob-end forward, gave it fresh impetus and initiated the bounding or snake motion to follow. Strehlow (1907, 1029) describes ‘bunches of grasses’ arranged on the playing course, in this case a ‘clear hard patch of ground’. Berndt (1953, 184) found the Dieri using a porcupine bush and James Love (1922, 14) also saw the latter using a ‘heap of rushes placed on the ground’. In the southeast of Queensland small ant-hills flattened to about six inches off the ground were prepared (Robertson 1904, 108). A clear area was required for this game but depending on the context of play a ‘course’ could vary from the smooth hard clay-pan favoured in the Lake Eyre region to any clear area. Tom Petrie (Petrie 1904, 108) found that Jagara men in the Brisbane region would most often play this game on the road to and from camp and on Murray Island men would throw the stick as they walked along the sandy beach (Haddon 1912, 317). The stick was always held by the thin end and swung with a straight arm, either over-arm or under-arm. In areas of Victoria, the needed force for throwing would be achieved by walking a short distance from the target, turning one’s back away from it and then suddenly running backwards a few steps, wheeling around abruptly, and then throwing the stick downwards to the target. In one account, the playing stick would sometimes hit the target, twist and return to the player in what was considered a clever (but unusual) throw (Robertson 1928, 7).

As with most Aboriginal games, the ‘prize’ for winning at this game was in the acknowledgement of the skill of the player and the motivation for playing was in the intrinsic aesthetic of the flight path and the pleasure this game could bring to both participant and onlooker.

I remember you telling me before that on Sundays you’d have to go to church at the mission and after church you’d go out, into the bush sometimes, and you played a game out there, some games?
No, we weren’t allowed to play games.
But you still played them?
Yes... not on the mission.
Further out?
We used to get out there on the sandhill you know and play game, made out of a stick, long stick you know. Sort of, grass like this grasping it lightly with the thumb and first and second fingers, and slightly doubling inwards the third and fourth, and then held it horizontally, nearly level with his forehead, very tenderly holding the tip of the head between the finger and thumb of the left hand. In this attitude he stood a second or two, and suddenly running backwards a few steps, violently wheeled round, and with extraordinary force threw the instrument downwards towards the hillock. The cone, touching the grassy mound, glanced off, and flew to a great distance, hitting the ground and again glancing off until its flight was stopped by some impediment. All the men were greatly excited, and, one after another, threw the Weet-weet. It is not easy to describe the mode in which it is thrown, but from Tommy Farmer, who attempted to teach me the use of the instrument, I learnt that it was by a kind of jerk just at the moment of leaving the hand that the best effect was produced. It is of course thrown underhand. Tommy Farmer was by far the most expert in throwing the Weet-weet, and he sent one so great a distance that I determined to ascertain by measurement how far he had thrown it... and we found that he had thrown it 220 yards. We were of the opinion that if its flight had not been checked by some rank fern and underwood which it struck, it would have gone much further. Many of the other men threw it easily 100, 150, and 190 yards. Its flight is so rapid that the eye cannot always follow it. It is a highly exciting and interesting game, but it is one that is not altogether free from danger. On one occasion, as I was informed, a person sitting carelessly too near the line of flight of the toys was struck by one, which pierced his thigh, and inflicted a dangerous wound. If the missile hit the softer parts of the body, it would penetrate deeply, and undoubtedly cause death. As well as I could ascertain, it is never used in battle. In olden times this game was frequently played. The players stood in a row and he who could throw the Weet-weet the greatest distance was accounted the winner.
Victoria.
Robert Brough-Smyth 1878, 352.
and throw it onto the grass and it run along. We used to play game and we thought that was alright, no harm in doing it. If they found out they’d soon cut it out.

Would they take away the stick?
Mm, take it away and burn it.
What did you call that game?
Kukuru name we call it.
Did children play that game as well?
Yes.
Were you a young fellow then, how old were you then?
Oh, about fourteen, fifteen.
Did middle-aged men play it?
Oh, they didn’t stop us, just the mission bloke. He was the only one, more strict you see.
Can you think of other games that you played?
Yes, we used to play games. Boomerangs … run it over the ground. Boomerangs along the ground?
Yes, throw it like this …
… along, end over end?
Yes. It goes a good way you know. Boomerang, if you throw yours, and I throw mine, yours might beat me. Then we’d count it up to ten.
So the winner was the one who would throw it the furthest. Did you have a name for that game?
Koonda warra.
What was the name for the boomerang?
Kirra.
What about playing with balls? Did you have any games with balls?
No, we tried to play balls alright. Like … cricket.
What about the women, did the women play any games that were different from the ones that the men played?
Some of them had games, but not a game what we had.
No, what sort was it?
With a little ball.
What did they do with that?
Just pass it to one another. Others trying to take it away.
What was the ball made of?
Jagu-jagu.
That was the ball?
Yes.
Was it made of wood?
No, no, just sewn up with cotton, socks or something like that, rag or something, make a shape of a ball … like little tennis ball.

Ben Murray speaking with Philip Jones (South Australian Museum) at the Davenport Home for Aged Aboriginals, Port Augusta, SA, July 1983.
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SKIPPING

Jump rope, or ‘skipping’ is another ancient pastime that has endured through the ages to become a popular urban street game. In nineteenth-century England a hop-stem was used in preference to a rope (Grunfeld 1975, 176). In Australia various vines and twisted nets were used in skipping games that, in some areas, were both elaborate and required a degree of skill not normally associated with the rhythmic movements and songs of urban children today. In New South Wales it was the domain of the older men who had a repertoire of moves that they enacted whilst the rope was turned. Here the rope was held by two men while other individuals took their turns jumping and at the same time miming various actions that required them to go on all fours and even lie down without breaking the rhythm of the rope. Catherine Parker (1905, 127) described the Juwalalai men of the Narran River in New South Wales lifting their feet as though to remove a thorn or crouching as though to dig yams or grind grass-seed. These men, especially the very old men, would also move out and back into the swing of the rope while catching up a child and holding it as they continued.

In southeast Queensland a skipping game was played by the Jagara people where the end of a vine rope would be tied to a tree and four people, with their totemic markers painted on, would be set to skip at once (in two pairs). The game required them to pass each other while skipping and at the same time mime the actions that indicated the totem to which they belonged. The first to be struck by the rope would be ‘out’ (Winterbotham 1957, 124). Both Jagara men and women also played a skipping game using the vines that grew along the shore, jumping rope on the hard sand near the water. Here only one or two would skip for as long as possible without halting, a performance made more difficult by the aggressive tactics of those who turned the rope (Petrie 1904, 110). In the Riverina area between Victoria and New South Wales, a loosely twisted duck net made a jumping rope from six to nine metres long. Here one after the other would jump in until ‘as many as a dozen’ would be skipping at once (Beveridge 1889, 49). In north-west-central Queensland, the Maidhargari children made a rope, turi turi, from the roots of the white gum for a skipping game where the rope was not swung overhead but from side to side (Roth 1902, 488). A vine rope was used in the same way by Wogadj children on the Daly River in the Northern Territory (Basedow 1925, 83).

MARBLES

For those who remember the marble season, where it seemed that every child was equipped with a rudimentary set of marbles and every free moment on the school ground was given to acquiring more, it will come as no surprise that marbles rank among the oldest and most widespread games, known in ancient Egypt and pre-Christian Rome. In Australia, shells, wood, nuts, and later European glass marbles were and still are used. Daisy Bates (MS 365-36/97) refers to a game played by west Kimberley boys with a species of nut that they would roll along the ground. Gugada boys near Tarcoola in South Australia used wooden

A very favourite game of the old men was skipping, brumbahl, they called it. They had a length of rope, a man at each end to swing it. When it is in full swing you go across the skipping rope. After skipping in an ordinary way for a few rounds, he begins the variations, which consist, amongst other things, of his taking thorns out of his feet, digging as if for larvae for ants, digging yams, grinding grass-seed, jumping like a frog, doing a sort of cobbyers dance, striking an attitude as if looking for something in the distance, running out, snatching up a child, and skipping with it in his arms, or lying flat down on the ground, measuring his full-length in that position, rising and letting the rope slip under him; the rope going the whole time, of course, never varying in pace nor pausing for any of these variations. The one who can most successfully vary these performance is the victor. Old men of over seventy seemed the best at skipping.


Skipping is indulged in by little girls and little boys alike. A long vine is used by the Wogains on the Daly River, which is swung to and fro like a pendulum by two of the players, whilst others jump over the line as it passes beneath them. The rope is not swung overhead.

NT.

Herbert Basedow 1925, 83.

It may not be generally known that skipping with a vine was an amusement with the Brisbane blacks before ever they saw the white man’s skipping-ropes used. But so it was, and the vine was circled round and round just as we do a rope, and also, like us, either one person or two could skip at a time. Men or women went in for amusement, and it was a great thing to skip on the hard sand between sandhills or on the seashore. Whatever kind of vine was handled at the time was used, either those of the scrub or a creeper which grew on the seashore.

Qld. Jagara people.

Tom Petrie 1904, 110.

Another favourite amusement of theirs is the skipping rope... from twenty to thirty feet long. It is usually made of a long duck net loosely twisted. It is
worked by two young men, one at each end, and just far enough apart to allow for the rope to touch the ground. As it is being swung round and round the skippers jump in one after another, until there will be as many as a dozen skipping away at once...

Riverina, NSW/Vic.
Peter Beveridge 1889, 49.

The West Kimberley boys played games with a species of nut resembling a marble which they called birrirr-birrirr baalo. Jadagurr or fishtraps, kangaroo traps, etc., were outlined with the birrirr-birrirr and the nuts were also rolled along the ground in a fashion similar to the game of bowls, except that there was no ball or marble to aim at. Very young boys played jaanggangoro womba (sorcerers) by putting one of these marbles into their mouths and pretending to take it out of their ear, nose or some other part of their body, or taking it out of the stomach of a make believe patient.

West Kimberley, WA.
Daisy Bates nd MS 365-36/97.

The boys of the Kookatha tribe, who lived near Tarcoola, in South Australia, played marbles with wooden marbles. The marbles that were placed in the ring were called kooka, which means meat; the marble used for shooting (what we called the ‘alley-tor’, when we were boys), was called by the Kookatha boys the kodji, which means spear.

Tarcoola, SA.
James Love 1922, 14.

Some of the smaller children started a game to show me. There was a ring traced in the sand and cowrie shells laid out in it, and the kids in turn thumbed-flicked other small cowries at these or at each others shells ... A spiral univalve that was very common in various colours and patterns often replaces the cowries, more suitably as being almost perfect spheres: the lust for winning did not seem at all decreased by the fact that losers could collect another score or more of ‘marbles’ in a few minutes from the inexhaustible beach. But rounders dominated, the girls throwing as cleanly and accurately as the boys.

Murray Island, Torres Strait. R Raven-Hart 1949, 16.

marbles in much the same way that the traditional circle game is played, where a group of marbles are placed in the centre of the circle to be shot at with ‘shooter’ marbles from the periphery of the circle (Love 1922, 14). For both, little detail has been provided as to the rules of the game but in the latter game the marbles at the centre, kooka, were said to represent meat and those used to shoot into the centre were said to represent spears, kodji. Another circle game was played by the children of Murray Island in the 1940s using cowrie shells, also placed at the centre and shot at from the outside (Raven-Hart 1949, 16).

Two (of six) marbles made of myall wood and used by Gugada boys near Tarcoola, SA.
Collected by James Love ca 1900.
South Australian Museum.

Children playing marbles. Darnley Island, Torres Strait, Qld.
Photograph: W MacFarlane.

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.
‘BOARD GAMES’

Among the sedentary games played in groups and circled by onlookers is a ‘stone game’ once played in areas of central Australia, Victoria and possibly central Queensland. This game appears to be a variation of a familiar board game but played in the sand with stone markers. With the exception of the games played by the Walbiri of Hooker Creek and Yuendumu, little detail has been recorded. The Walbiri games have been compared to the French game of *mérells* or *jeu de moulin* (‘game of mill’) which also has a German counterpart named *Mühle* (also meaning mill), and the English game of ‘ring’, a form of ‘merels’ or ‘three-men’s morris’, all board games of great antiquity. Meggitt (1958, 191–94) puzzles over the origin of two games played at Hooker Creek both using playing stones. One of these, likened to three men’s morris, is described as the ‘true’ board game where these counters have defined powers of movement. Meggitt describes this as a quiet game played by two opponents around a ring drawn on the ground and divided into eight wedges. Each player moves three counters to form a straight line through the centre, the strategy being to force the opponent to occupy the central point, and then to force him from the centre. Meggitt speculates that this game may have originated with Asian immigrants, ‘Afghan’ camel drivers of the late 1860s, though acknowledging that older men at Hooker Creek maintain that this game has always been played. Miller (1983, 76) refers to ‘stone’ games played at Yuendumu in recent years where several variations are played in the sand with three stones or other markers, and by males and females of all ages. The children appear to play a modern game of noughts and crosses, where adults play a ‘more complicated’ version thought to have been introduced by German missionaries at Hermannsburg (Robertson 1975). This game is related both to kleine *mühlen*spiel, or nine men’s morris which involves a ‘board’ based on three nested squares, the outer two intersected with four equidistant lines. The object is to form a ‘mill’ or row of three pieces on a line.9 Two other cryptic references have so far been found, one (Whitehouse 1969, 2) to ‘morella stones’ (merels, *mèrells*) that may have served as game markers, found in the Longreach area of Queensland. The other reference is to ‘game stones’ in a classification scheme for ‘Aboriginal Stone Implements’, proposed by Kenyon and Stirling (1901, 191) and may relate to those game stones collected by Kenyon, now at the Museum of Victoria.

AIRBORNE AND RETURNING TOYS

There are a number of ephemeral toys that are made to whirl and fly, sometimes to return and sometimes simply to drift upwards on a hot air current. Too, there are the more substantial wooden cross-boomerangs that engendered competition and the judgement of the most able throwers. All of these would depend on the skill of the player and on a particular aerodynamic quality in their construction, being crafted by the human hand or found in the natural form of a leaf or a cuttlefish bone.

Leaf casting was a pastime enjoyed particularly in Central Queensland but it was also recorded for central Australia and New South Wales, where leaves were cast into the updraughts of a fire. Norman

The young children purchase marbles with which they play a version of the European children’s game called ‘knucklebones’.

SA. Piranjatjara people.

Peter Broershka 1978, 121.

Immediately following Christmas, with its yearly rash of marble bags for the boys, marbles were all the rage. Until the marbles were chipped beyond the ability to roll, groups of boys would sit for hours facing each other on a smooth piece of ground. Between each group and those opposite a row of snail-shells would be placed and the boys aimed at these.

Milingimbi, NT.

Ann Wells 1963, 149.

Several variations of the stone games appear to be played by both sexes and a wide range of ages. These games are usually played in the sand with stones or some other suitable markers. One game is played with two players who each have three markers. The object of this game is for each player to try and form a straight line either diagonally, vertically or horizontally with his or her markers. The players move alternately, but it was unclear how the first mover was chosen. The children who were observed playing this game played a whole series and kept a tally in the sand of who won each time. More complicated versions are played by some adults, sometimes for money. It has been speculated that these games were introduced via the German missionaries at Hermannsburg mission.

Yuendumu, NT, Walbiri people.

Maria Miller 1983, 76.

The children play with a leaf heated and twisted, which is flicked into the flame of a fire, and they watch it ascend in the smoke in exact imitation of the movements of a boomerang. They sometimes use the winged seed of *etalaya hemilauca* (the whitewood), the gyrations of which cause them amusement.

North Qld.

E Palmer 1884, 289.

Wimberoo was a favourite fireside game.

A big fire was made of leafy branches. Each player got a dry coolabah leaf,
warmed it until it bent a little, then placed it on two fingers and hit it with one into where the current of air, caused by the flame, caught it and bore it aloft. They all jerked their leaves together, and anxiously watched whose would go highest. Each watched his leaf descend, caught it and began again. So on until tired.

Narran River, NSW.
Catherine L Parker 1905, 129.

Any leaf, small piece of light bark, or even a mussel-shell, by means of a peculiar motion of the wrist and arm, can be thrown in such manner into the dense smoke rising from an ample fire as to ascend with it like a spiral ... At almost the opposite extremity of the State, in the neighbourhood of Rockhampton, I have seen the leaves of the brigalow (Acacia harpophylla ...) similarly used in making smoke-spirals.

Qld.
Walter Roth 1902a, 488.

Later, piling a lot of bushes on the fire to make a big flare, they started playing Bindjera, a game in which the dead leaves of the brigalow (Acacia harpophylla) were made into miniature boomerangs, and flapped with a rotary motion into the current of hot air, where, spinning with increased velocity, they climbed up and up in beautiful spiral until they lost the influence of the draught and fluttered dejectedly down to mother earth again ... Only a few old bushmen that I have met have seen or played this game, and fewer, alas, are now ever likely to, so the manner of preparing the leaf and imparting the spin to it are perhaps worthy of record.

Central Qld.
F B Campbell 1910, 117.

The King Sound men construct miniature kalli, barely an inch in length, and practically straight, which they project, before the admiring eyes of their juvenile audience, by using their fingers only. The little toy is held between the second and third phalanges of the index finger, so that a good half of its length projects above the hand. The inner tip of the right index finger is pressed strongly against the outer surface of the

Making and casting a leaf ‘boomerang’ (1) ‘Choosing a thoroughly dry and flat leaf [brigalow leaf] ... with a moderate curve ... it was held close to the flame ... for a second or two, breathed upon until the moist breath made the hot leaf temporarily flaccid, and then pinched laterally until concave for about one inch in the middle.’

(2) ‘Holding the middle pinched between the finger and thumb, about a third of the leaf at each end was doubled back towards the convex side and broken off square.’

(3) ‘With the concave side down, a corner of the prepared leaf was held in the crease of the middle joint of the hooked index finger of the left hand ... and the point of the middle finger of the right hand placed almost behind the joint and touching the corner of the leaf (4), pressure was then exerted until the finger slipped off the joint with a flip, projecting the missile with considerable force and communicating to it the desired spin.’

Gunggarri and Jagalingu techniques of leaf casting. Central Queensland. From descriptions and illustrations by FB Campbell 1910, 117–118.

Tindale (South Australian Museum) collected such leaves used by the children at MacDonald Downs, NT, an activity also recorded on film by the Board for Anthropological Research Expedition (Tindale and Fry 1933).

For this game, the leaf was either a simple leaf that would spin according to the skill of the thrower, or a modified leaf that was twisted at either end. A number of writers refer to a ‘leaf boomerang’ game that was played in central Queensland, also on the hot air currents of a large fire, with a leaf that resembled a boomerang, the dried leaf of the
'Brigalow-acacia' (or *Acacia harpophylla*). F B Campbell (1910, 117) gives a detailed description of the casting techniques used by Gunggarri and Jagalingu men who would form the leaf into a miniature boomerang and flip it with a rotary motion into the upward draft of the fire. Walter Roth also describes and illustrates three different methods for casting this leaf.

Similar skill was exhibited by the children of the Kimberley who would flick leaves in imitation of the boomerang. The men of King Sound in the Kimberley also made a miniature returning stick 'barely an inch in length and practically straight' (Basedow 1925, 82). This was sent into the air with a springboard action as it was held between the fingers of one hand and flipped with the other — a feat often attempted by children but with little success.

On a larger scale, pieces of bark could be made into returning toys, such as those described by Tom Petrie (Petrie 1904, 110) and used by Jagara boys in the Brisbane area in the early 1900s. Thrown with the first finger and thumb, these would circle and return much like the boomerang. The wood for this toy was to be found in the top branches of the fig-leaf box tree when the sap was running. Once stripped of bark and cut to a length of 150-180 mm (and about 40 mm wide), the ends would be rounded and the whole would be put into hot ashes in order to bend it into a half-circle.

Walter Roth (1897, 129) describes a toy used in north-west-central Queensland, *kun-di kun-di*, similar in shape but larger than that described above (about 460–510 mm) and pointed at either end. Held with the convex side forward, it would be thrown against a log on the ground somewhat like the playing stick only in this case the stick would rise in a horizontal spinning motion straight into the air.

Daisy Bates (MS 365-36/102) describes a boomerang-like toy made by the children of the Gascoyne region of Western Australia. These were made from bark and thrown against the wind to make them circle.

The South Australian Museum holds two bark toys from Central Australia that are meant to spin in the air, one that has been used by Walbiri children from Cockatoo Creek and the other by Pitjantjatjara left thumb and suddenly allowed to slip over the top edge and strike the projecting part of the toy. The little slab of wood is jerked into the air, whirls through space in a parabolic curve, and, when well managed, returns to the hand of the projector. The children often try this feat, but, with the exception of a rare flake, never succeed; in fact, it is not every adult man who can do it.

Kimberley, WA.
Herbert Basedow 1925, 82.

Yet another toy (which does not appear to have been hitherto drawn attention to or described) played with like the boomerang, was just a small piece of bark, obtained from the top branches of the fig-leaf box. The bark was taken six or seven inches long and an inch and a half wide, then was rounded at both ends, and put into hot ashes. While hot it was bent into almost a half-circle, and kept so till, when cold and hard, it had taken on that shape. The bark mentioned is the only kind suitable for these toys, and they could only be made one at a time in the year, when the sap was up, and allowed the bark to peel off easily. Father as a boy made a number of them, and, of course, has often thrown them and had lots of fun in the game. For sides could be taken for this also. These toys were thrown with the first finger and thumb, and circled and returned as a boomerang.

Brisbane region, Qld, Jagara people.
Tom Petrie 1904, 110.

The *kun-di kun-di*, an airborne toy made of wood and used in north-west-central Queensland. Made to circle into the air after impact with a log or branch on the ground. Described and illustrated by Walter Roth 1897, 129.

A returning toy made from a strip of tin by little boys in the Kimberley, 130 mm by 25 mm. These would be thrown into the air and would circle around, sometimes for as long as ten seconds, before returning to the feet of the player.

*Australian Museum.*
revolving in its flight on a more or less horizontal plane.
North-West-Central Qld.
Walter Roth 1897, 129.

A game for girls and boys was played with the aid of a piece of bark about 3 inches long, which they snapped at the edges and sides somewhat like a yandee. This they threw against the wind and it described a circular motion in the air before it came down to earth. The 'little yandees' looked very pretty flying about the air, each child shouting out that his or her piece of bark was the best 'flier'. Giss coyne District, WA.
Daisy Bates nd MS 365-36/102.

The sea-beach supplies in plenty a missile which, from the hands of a black boy, has a fantastic flight. This is the bone of the cuttle fish (kno-gear) which, when thrown concave surface down against the wind and after the style of the boomerang, whirls rapidly and makes a decided effort to return. It is also thrown along the surface of the sea as white boys do 'skipping stones', often reaching astonishing distances in a wonderful series of skips.
Dunk Island, Qld.
Edward Banfield 1911, 263.

I have frequently seen them fold a leaf of a common palm into a square, give the two corners a little twist, one to each side, and throw it into the air, making it skim round and return.
Qld.
Carl Lumholtz 1889, 57.

Boys and girls take any kind of hard gum leaf between thumb and forefinger to throw it. With this they only use the forearm in an underarm throw (they do not take aim with the whole arm), and in the moment of throwing they flick their wrist, through which the leaf makes a circular movement similar to boomerang throwing. Their skill in throwing leaves is rather incredible. You can see immediately an inborn dexterity.
Broome, WA.
Facher Droste 1928, 71.

Piar-Piar, a pandanus leaf that has been folded to make a returning toy that imitates the flight of the boomerang, 220 mm by 88 mm. Described and collected from Dunk Island by Edward Banfield in 1911. Australian Museum.

Pandanus propeller, made by plaiting or knot-folding four strips of pandanus to form a cross. Used both as an airborne toy and a toy that will whirl at the end of a spindle. This was collected in 1948 at Yirrkala as part of the Commonwealth Government of Australia and the National Geographic Society of America Expedition to Arnhem Land. Australian Museum.

children from Malupiti. A toy now at the South Australian Museum that may have been used in a similar fashion by Pitjantjatjara children at Ernabella is made from reeds into a boomerang form (although it also resembles the toy axes woven from spinifex, mentioned earlier). Finally, there are two boomerang-like returning toys in the Australian Museum made by Kimberley boys. These are rectangular strips of tin that have been slightly bent in order to allow them to circle and hover before returning to the player.

Boomerang-like toys were also made by folding pandanus leaves into a Z shape by forming two flat-knot folds at the centre, leaving the ends pointing in opposite directions. Edward Banfield describes these for Dunk Island where they were called 'little fella boomerang' because they would circle and return to the player, sometimes making two complete circles. Three examples of these are now at the Australian Museum, along with those collected by Roth from Cape Grafton on the Cape York Peninsula (where the game was called jakal).
COMMUNITY PLAY

What is known as the *piar-piar* accomplishes the flight of the boomerang, and is therefore termed familiarly the 'little fella boomerang' ... is made from a strip from the side of the leaf of one of the pandanus palms (*Pandanus pediculatus*). The prickles having been sliced off with a knife or the finger nails, two distinct half hitches are made in reverse order. Each end is shortened and roughly trimmed, the knots creased and squeezed to flatness between the teeth and lips, and the toy complete, the making having occupied less than a minute. Before throwing the ends are slightly deflexed. The toy is held in the right hand lightly between the thumb and first and second fingers, concave surface down, and is thrown to the left with a quick upward turn of the wrist. After a short rapid flight almost on the plane of the hand of the thrower the toy soars upwards, and taking a sinistral course, returns, twirling rapidly, to the thrower, occasionally making two complete revolutions. The ends are deflexed prior to each throw. Boys and youths are fond of the *piar-piar*, and men of sober years do not disdain it, being frankly pleased when they succeed in causing it to execute a more prolonged and graceful flight than ordinary.

Dunk Island, Qld.
Edward Banfield 1911, 261.

Another form of aeroplane, *par-gir-ah*, comes from the pandanus palm, its parts being plaited together. This is thrown high and descends spirally, twisting so rapidly throughout its course that it appears to be a solid disc. This is also used as a 'windmill', being affixed to a spindle. Children run with the toy against the wind and find similar ecstasy to those of whites of the age and kidney.

Dunk Island, Qld.
Edward Banfield 1911, 262.

The simple whirligig *make* is a very widely spread toy. It is also found in the Solomon Islands in Melanesia, and in Funafuti (Ellice Group) and Rotumah in Polynesia.

Alfred Haddon 1901, 225.
Another toy which has the soaring flight of the boomerang is made out of two portions of the leaf of the pandanus palm stitched together in the form of a St Andrew’s Cross. It is thrown like a boomerang, the flight being circular, and when it is made to complete two revolutions round the thrower that individual is manifestly pleased with himself. This is known as birra-birra-goo.

Dunk Island, Qld.
Edward Banfield 1911, 262.

The [cross boomerang] is imitated by some of the smaller children by means of thick swamp-grass, etc. The two strips are either pierced and tied, as in the case of the wooden ones, or else plaited together. It is thrown with a twist of the wrist up in the air, whence it soon returns in a right or left spiral.

Cape York, Qld.
Walter Roth 1902a, 513.

The ‘Cross’ is made of two pointed laths, from about 8 to 10 inches long, drilled at their centres and fixed cross-wise in position with split lawyer-cane ... It is met with in the coastal districts extending from Cardwell to Mossman, and to the Mallanpara blacks of Tully is known as pirbu-pirbu. Like the toy boomerang, it is used by men and boys only, and thrown according to two methods.

Cape York, Qld.
Walter Roth 1902a, 513.

On dark nights this boomerang [the returning boomerang] will sometimes be lighted at one end and thrown into the air, with an effect very like fireworks.

Vic.
James Dawson 1881, 85.

Four of these ‘come-back’ boomerangs (tips glowing with fire and thrown at various heights by one thrower, an expert) passing each other above and below in circular flight yet never colliding. Tips aglow like rubies yet never to burst into flame.

Southwest Qld.
Alice Duncan-Kemp 1968, 94.

A typical cross-whirler or cross boomerang. The former would be made of pandanus leaves stitched together. These were used until quite recently on Dunk Island (near Cape York, Qld), and were collected and described by Edward Banfield ca 1910. The cross boomerang, collected and described by W Roth, was made from wood and was used in the coastal districts, from Cardwell to Mossman, Queensland. Here, children would also make swamp grass whirlers in the same way. Examples of both are in the Australian Museum.

A cross boomerang from Herberton, northern Queensland. Made of hardwood with holes drilled at the centre for joining the two laths, 280 mm long.
National Museum of Australia.

like the wooden crosses or four lengths were plaited together as described above. On Dunk Island these birra-birra-goo were made from pandanus and stitched together.

The wooden cross boomerang appears to have been used in both north Queensland on Cape York Peninsula and southeast Queensland. In both areas it was used as a toy in throwing competitions that would determine the best return. Walter Roth describes and illustrates the flight pattern which could be made as a right or left spiral. G K Dunbar also records their use on the central Darling River in New South Wales where they were used both as a toy and to lower the flight of birds.
COMMUNITY PLAY

FIREWORKS

The camp fire inspires its own kind of play and draws young and old to marvel at the effect of firelight against the sky. In Australia, a number of fireworks effects would be achieved by lighting the tips of old spears, of the crossboomerangs described above as well as the returning boomerangs. Alice Duncan-Kemp (1964, 94), who lived and travelled in the far southwest of Queensland, described an elaborate display made by a number of returning boomerangs, each with their tips glowing, spiralling around each other. Similarly, in Victoria, James Dawson (1881, 85) found boomerangs lighted at one end only and thrown to circle freely in the night sky. And, in the Gascoyne and Broome regions of Western Australia, throwing sticks would be lighted at one end and thrown along the ground, rising into the air after a moment or two and circling there. This took the form of a game in the west Kimberley region, where the players who could make their weapon circle the highest and the longest were considered the winners (Bates nd MS 365-36/93, 103). In Tasmania, lighted spears would be thrown high into the trees giving the effect of a starry night sky (Robinson 1829 in Plomley 1966, 194).

In Central Australia, tufts of leaves would be lit and whirled around the head in a kind of fireworks ‘sparkler’ (Latz 1982, 105) and in the Northern Territory bark discs would be cut from a gum tree, placed in the fire until they burnt and then catapulted into the air, giving the appearance of a wheel of fire. W E Harney (1952, 378), describing this phenomena, observed that this display would often happen on cold nights to encourage the sun to rise quickly.

The crossboomerang, consisting of two flat sticks bound together at right angles and thrown on the horizontal plane, were used for the same purpose [as plaything and thrown into flights of birds causing them to drop lower in flight]. I have made and used these weapons.

Central Darling River, NSW, Ngjamba people.
G K Dunbar 1943, 148.

A game was played at night ... with lighted kylees by the boys and young men who would stand certain distances apart and having lighted one point of their kylee would throw them up in the air where they would remain circling round and round for several minutes without coming to the ground. A very dark night was chosen for this game, which might be termed a species of native fireworks. The kylees were thrown straight forwards, and after going some distance (without touching the ground at all), they rose up in the air, each kylee performing its own circular motion without coming into contact with any of the others. All of them were whirling in the air at the same time. Even when their force was spent and they fell to the ground they ... came quietly down within a little distance of each other. As soon as they alighted they were again and again thrown up by the boys, the game lasting sometimes for hours. The spectacle of these lighted sticks whirling round and round in the darkness must have been very curious.

Gascoyne and Broome region, WA.
Daisy Bates nd MS 365-36/103.

The kirra-kul tree [Eupomatia laurina] provides also the means of obtaining that joy in loud explosions which is instinctive in the boy, whatsoever his race or colour. Young, lusty shoots several feet long, and full of sap, are placed in the fire for a few minutes, and upon being ‘bashed’ on a log or other hard substance the heated gas contained in the pithy core bursts out with a pistol-like report.

Dunk Island, Qld.
Edward Banfield 1911, 265.

Two bark missiles, pululumi, from Hermannsburg. These would be set alight in the fire and thrown into the air for a display on a dark night.
South Australian Museum.
They get the large stalk of the fern leaf, which they heat in the fire and then stick in the ground, which makes an explosion like a musket.

Tasmania.

One particular form of the fire-game was to cut a piece of bark from a gum-tree and notch it at one end to form a disc. This was placed in the fire and when blazing was thrown into the air by striking it sharply against a stout piece of wood held in the other hand. The sudden jolt sends the fiery disc-wheel into the darkness of the night. 'Like sun,' the people would exclaim as it went on its way. Apparently this was some form of magic, because it was often done on cold nights, under the belief that it made the sun rise quickly.

NT.
W E Harney 1952, 378.

To this repertoire of fireworks was added the occasional explosion. Edward Banfield (1911, 265) reported this kind of fire-play enjoyed by the Dunk Island people who would take the young shoots of the \textit{kina-kul} tree and place these on the fire until they were hot enough to explode when struck. The effect of heating the sap would release the gas contained in the core of the branches and this, when struck, would produce a loud 'pistol-like report'. Similarly, Tasmanian men would heat the stalk of a large fern and thrust it into the ground to produce an explosive result (Robinson in Plomley 1966, 370).