

WOMEN'S BUSINESS SEASON

The European named season of Spring in Melbourne coincides with the beginning of the Kulin season of 'Regeneration and Women's Business'. It is so named because in traditional Aboriginal society, birth control practices ensured that all children were born in this 'Spring' period.

Woiwurrung women for instance used the kangaroo apple as a contraceptive. When green it is toxic, but when red ripe in December and January it is harmless. Consequently all Woiwurrung children were conceived in Summer and born the following September or October.

Aboriginal people saw themselves as part of the ecosystem, so children being born in Spring was just being in tune with nature. Spring babies also had time to gather strength before the heat of Summer.

The arrival of this two month season is heralded by the hatching of butterflies and the arrival of Darebin, the Welcome Swallow. This little bird spends Winter in Northern Australia, but returns at the end of August to announce Women's Business Season. During this time births were attended by the midwives and women elders, but it was also when girls in early teenage were formally inducted into adulthood.

All birthing ceremonies were held at special locations, usually southwest of a camp and marked by special 'Birthing Trees'. These were created by two saplings being tied together, so that the tree grew with two original trunks fused into a single trunk above the birthing site. Also called 'Arched Marker Trees' they were adjacent to a cleared area where the ceremonies to induct girls into adulthood were conducted. These initiation ceremonies were known as *Murrup Turukurup*.

As well as being marked by Arched Marker Trees, the directions to such birthing and initiation places were often marked by 'Ring Marker Trees'. This is where the branches of a sapling had been tied so that a branch or trunk of the tree grew with a hole in it, like the eye of a huge needle. Such Marker Trees gave the men adequate warning that a birthing place was nearby and must be avoided.

I know of two such trees in Manningham. The first was an Arched Marker Tree that stood in Newman's Road Templestowe near its junction with Webster's Road. My mother used to pass it on the way to school before it was removed about 1928.

The second was a Ring Marker Tree off Reserve Road in Wonga Park near Brushy Creek. It was about 500 metres south of the birthing place near the junction of Brushy Creek (Barngeong) with the Yarra. This was in fact the birthplace of the famed Woiwurrung leader William Barak. The marker tree fell many years ago with the huge ring branch now lying on the ground.

Women were of course entirely responsible for care of such sites and the preparations for birthing. Men were forbidden to enter birthing sites, unless at the express invitation of women for specific ceremonies, but not the birth itself. Birth was entirely women's business. The role of men was just to leave food at a designated spot and otherwise pace up and down in worried anticipation. During the women's business season men also had to undertake the gathering tasks normally done by women.

After giving birth in the possum cloak lined depression under the birthing tree, the mother was bathed with smoke from herbs. The child was ritually daubed with ochre, the umbilical cord cut and the placenta buried. The child was then introduced to their father who was presented with the umbilical cord, which he wore in pride as a necklace. The child's totems would then be confirmed by the family. Totems signified spiritual relationships that linked the child to their family, clan and world around them.

In the women's initiation ceremony, two smoking fires were lit and the women dusted the initiates with powdered charcoal. Food was placed on a stick like a shish kebab and held by the girl. The young men of the tribe would form a row and stamp their feet in unison as they slowly approached and encircled her. The young men then threw sticks or flowers toward the initiate and vowed to protect her as a sister.

The youths would each take food from the stick she held, chew it and spit it into one of the two fires and return to their line formation facing the girl. The sticks or flowers were collected by the women and buried or otherwise destroyed in the fire. Men and women then participated together in a ritual dance to end the ceremony.

On 25th October 2013, a special ceremony was held, led by Wurundjeri Women Elders, to formally re-dedicate the historic birthing site at Brushy Creek. It was a landmark event and probably the largest Wurundjeri women's ceremony held since colonial settlement in 1835. After the special ceremony local men and women, both indigenous and non-indigenous, also enjoyed participating in traditional dances.