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SOME EXAMPLES OF ABORIGINAL SHELTERS AND FIREPLACES FROM CENTRAL ARNHEM LAND

ABSTRACT — Two basic types of Aboriginal shelter constructions from central Arnhem Land (northern Australia) are discussed, viz., a flat-roofed shelter protecting against sunshine, and a gable-roof shelter offering more intimacy for the night's sleep. The use of local material — two kinds of eucalyptus bark — is stressed. Climatic adaptations for the rainy season — the use of rock shelters and the construction of higher sleeping platforms are also mentioned.

In 1969, a painted bark shelter was discovered in the Upper Wilton River area. A short description and photographic documentation of this unique find is attached.

KEY WORDS: Arnhem Land — Aboriginal shelters — Painted bark shelter.

Shelters constructed by the Aborigines of northern Australia in Arnhem Land are a good example of adaptation to local, especially climatic, conditions. During the dry season they offer protection against sunshine.

Often the simplest shelter, offering some shade, is seen in the form of one or two large leafy branches propped against a tree trunk so as to throw sufficient shade (Jelínek 1979). In that shade the Aborigines then carry out their small work during the day, such as making a spear or various small reparations.

A proper habitation has the form of a flat roof 120–140 cm high. It is supported by four posts simply driven into the ground. At their upper ends the posts are forked. Two opposite forks bear horizontal poles which in turn bear two or three transverse sticks. This construction is covered with pieces of eucalyptus bark — “paper bark” or “stringy bark” — plus

occasional leafy eucalyptus branches. Often the pieces of bark are weighed down with stones. Such a shelter is quite airy and its flat roof offers perfect shade. The size of the shelter depends on the number of persons using it. Often such a shelter is used only during the day and another shelter, low, with a gable-roof, built directly on the ground, is used for the night's sleep. The supporting construction consists of two vertical, forked posts driven into the ground, which bear a simple horizontal pole forming the ridge of this roof. Shorter lateral sticks lean against the ridgepole on either side and bear the roofing — larger pieces of eucalyptus bark “paper bark”). The ground plan of this shelter is a rectangle, sometimes approaching a square. Although the front and rear of the shelter are open, the sides are usually covered down to the ground and thus the shelter gives the impression of an at least partly closed space. Complete closure is not necessary for climatic reasons, and safety reasons are also problematical as none of the animals living in Australia could seriously endanger man. The shelter provides no protection against

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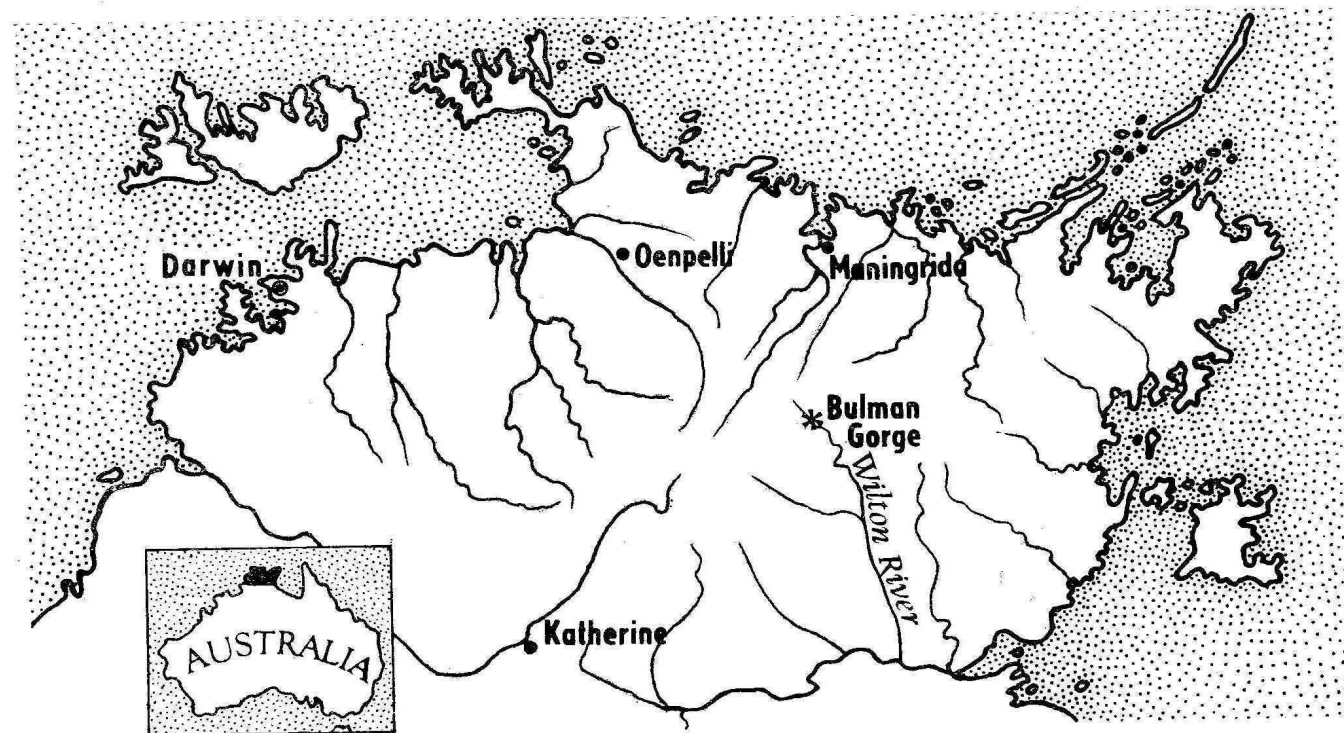


FIGURE 1. Australia, with Arnhem Land territory in the north.

snakes or troublesome insects. Hence, the reasons for the low, more closed construction are rather psychological as they offer the sensation of greater intimacy.

MATERIAL

The material used — eucalyptus bark or branches — is commonly available near water, i.e. in places sought by the Aborigines for a stay. "Paper bark" (*Melaleuca leucodendra* L.) is obtained with the aid of a digging stick with which they usually dig edible tubers. By tapping at a tree trunk they determine the thickness and suitability of the bark, which they then split along the length of the trunk with the tip of the stick and peel off as large a piece as possible with their hands. In a similar manner they also obtain the somewhat tougher "stringy bark" (*Eucalyptus tetrodonta* F.), which it is necessary to open with a stone or iron ax.

During the rainy season, the Aborigines also seek overhanging rocks and shallow caves which offer safe protection against rain, or (such as on the upper reaches of the Liverpool River) they construct higher shelters with an elevated dwelling platform.

PAINTED HUT

Exploring the interior of Arnhem Land, I found, on the upper reaches of the Wilton River in a place called Bulman Gorge, a rather small shelter with a flat roof. Besides pieces of "paper bark" (*Melaleuca leucodendra* L.), the roof was also covered with a long

strip of "stringy bark" (*Eucalyptus tetrodonta* F.) which was placed so as to form the bottom part of the cover in the middle part of the roof and was bent at a right angle to form the middle vertical strip of the rear part of the shelter (see fig. 13). On the inside of this strip of stringy bark, there were three paintings in the traditional X-ray style in red, yellow, white and some black paint (Jelinek 1979). Near the right rear vertical post there was, on the ground, a flat stone on which the paints were rubbed and which still had remains of lumps of the pigments. Red, yellow and white were mineral pigments and black was obtained by rubbing charcoal with water. The vertical part of the strip of "stringy bark" bore pictures of a kangaroo and an evil spirit resembling that which the Aborigines call "mamandi". A monitor lizard was pictured on its horizontal part. It is interesting that the youngest paintings, painted singly on rocks by the Aborigines in recent decades, are invariably in white paint only. The polychromy of the paintings in the shelter is apparently due to the fact that here the paintings were on bark. Where a painting on bark has survived (although rarely) until present it is polychromous as a rule. The paintings in the bark shelter are obviously analogous to those found on overhanging rocks which are used as shelters during rainy periods. Our find indicates clearly that besides common paintings of animals (monitor lizard and kangaroo) there is also a painting of mythological importance, one of the evil spirit mamandi. Thus the paintings found in dwelling places (whether under rocks or in bark shelters) are not only of secular importance, as stated by Spencer (Spencer 1914). The roof of this painted hut was weighed down with nine sizable stones, two of which were used for rubbing the paints, as indicated by the remains of paints on them. There were three fireplaces near the hut: one in its close proximity, apparently used as



FIGURE 2. Simple shade shelter. Central Arnhem Land.

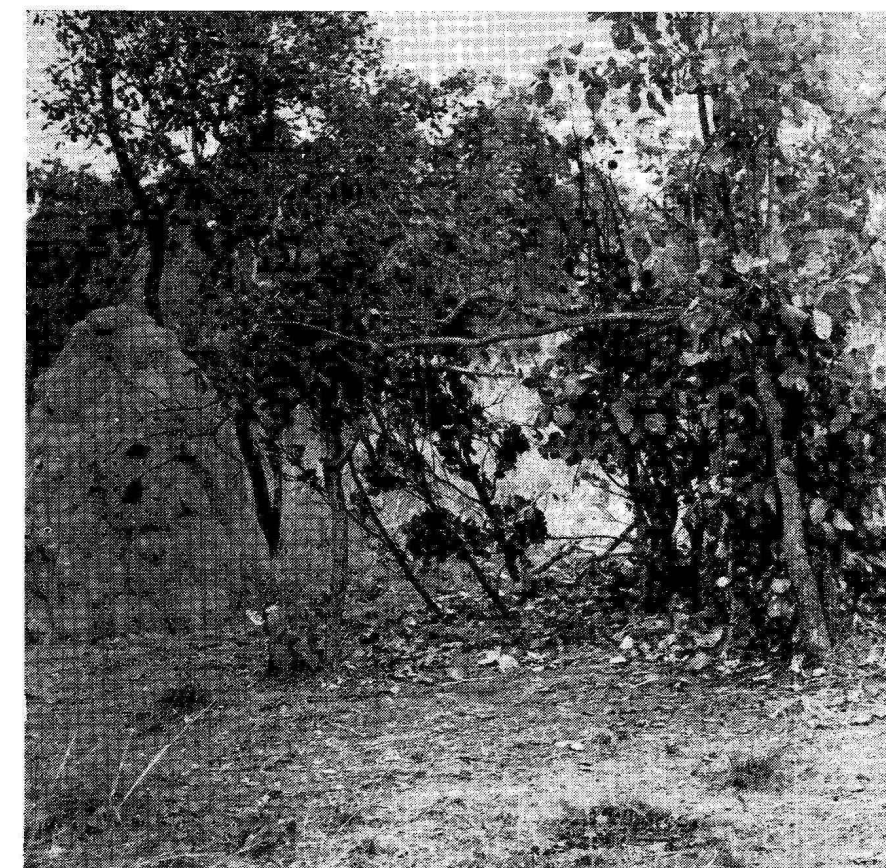


FIGURE 3. Provisional shade shelter. Mainoru, Arnhem Land.

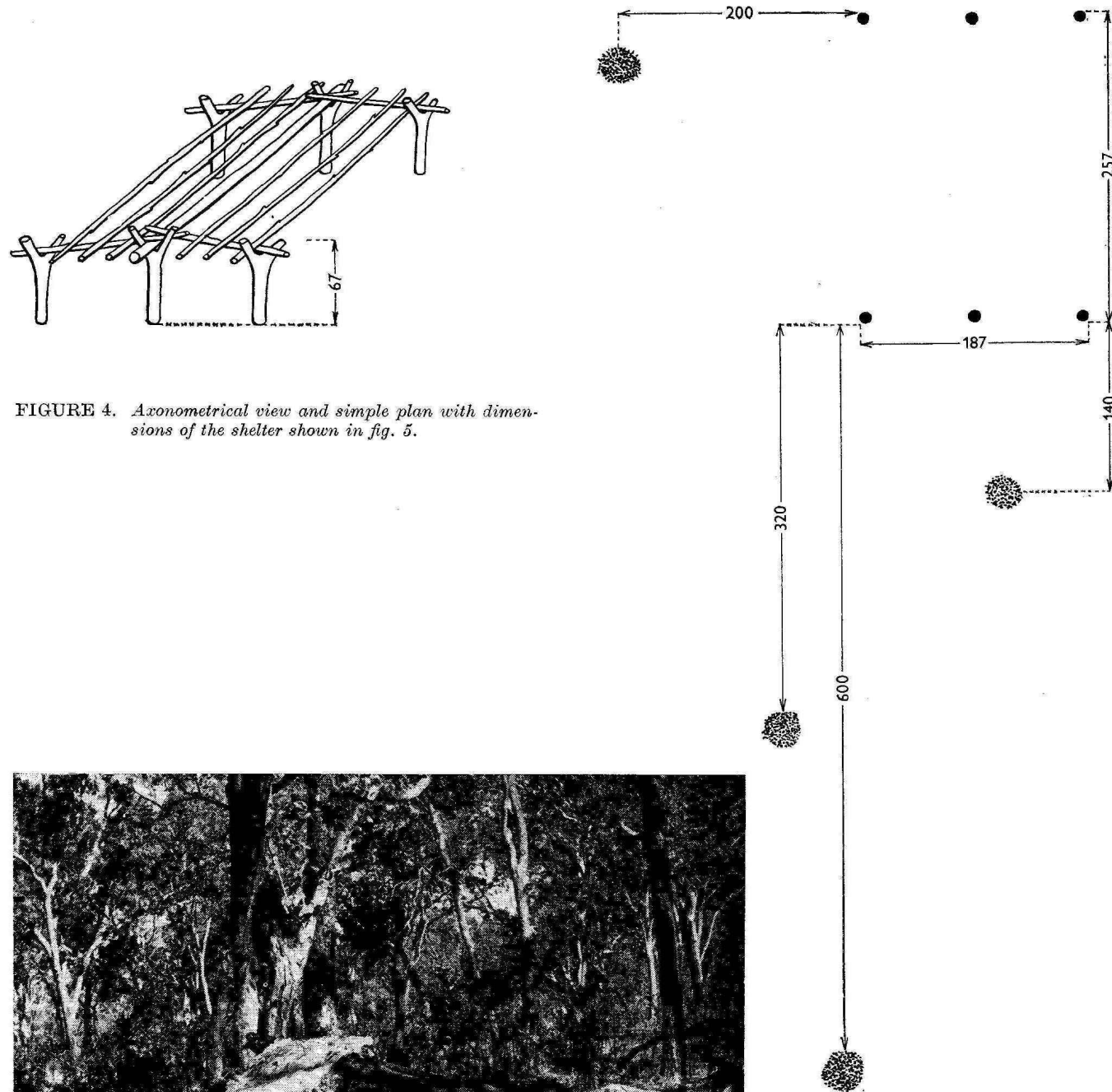


FIGURE 4. Axonometrical view and simple plan with dimensions of the shelter shown in fig. 5.



FIGURE 5. A bark shelter carcass. Central Arnhem Land.



FIGURE 6. Skeleton of a bark shelter. Central Arnhem Land.

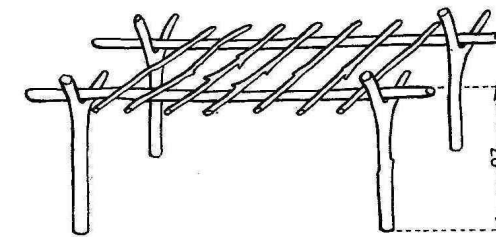


FIGURE 7. Axonometrical view and simple plan with dimensions of the shelter shown in fig. 6.



FIGURE 8. Another example of a bark shelter carcass. Bulman waterhole.



FIGURE 9. Another view of the same bark shelter as in fig. 8. Bulman waterhole.

FIGURE 10. Axonometrical view and simple plan with dimensions of the Bulman waterhole bark shelter.

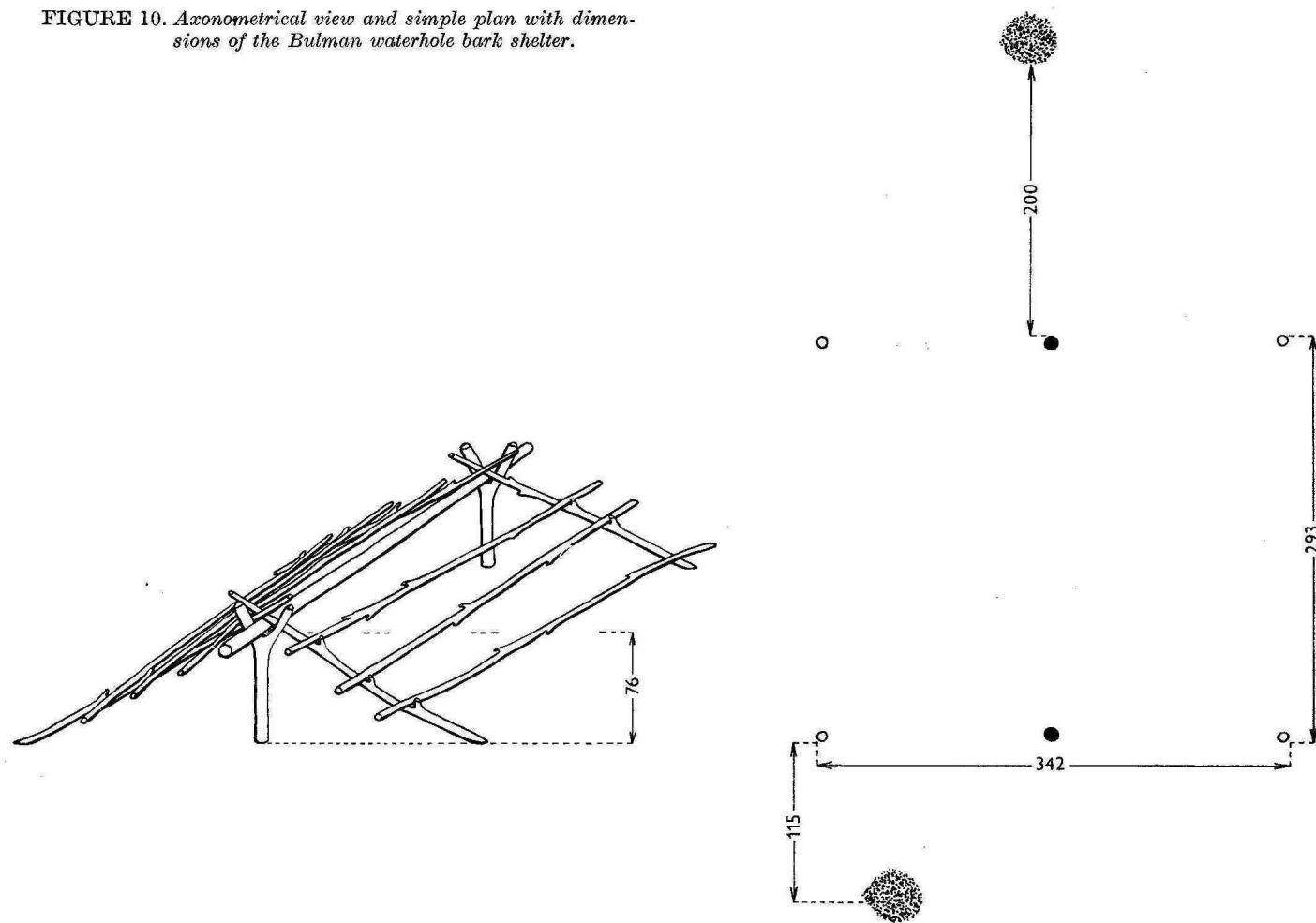


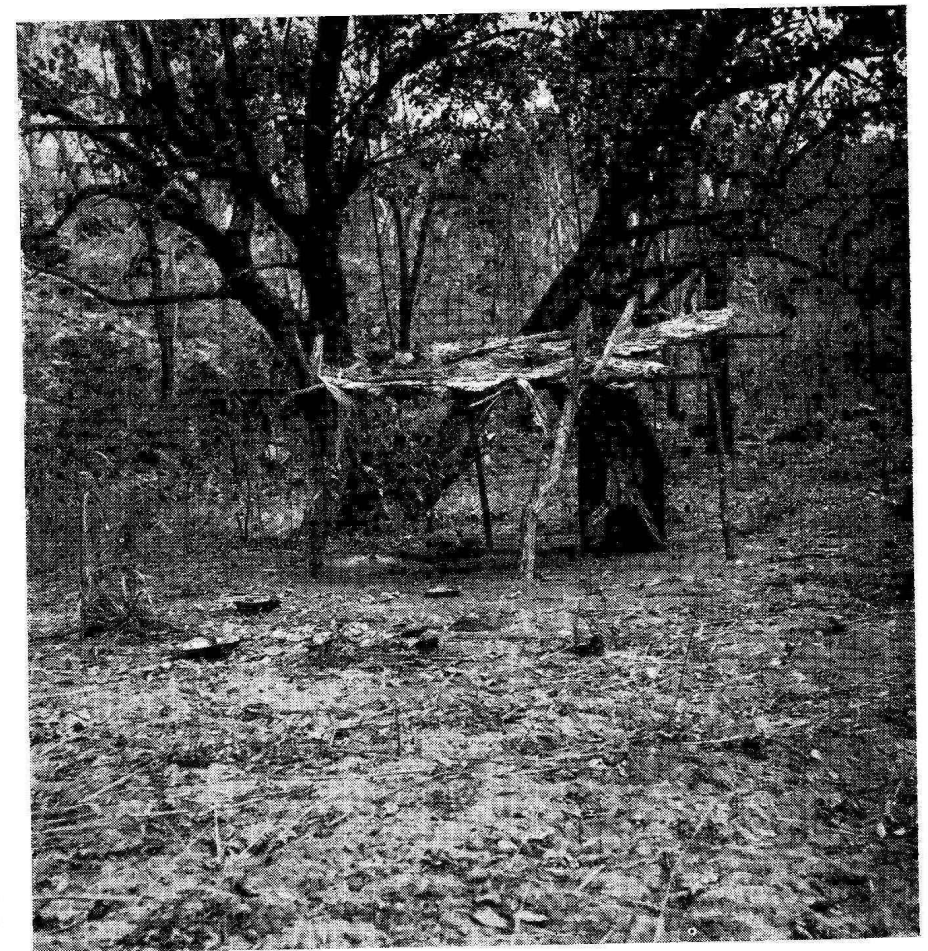
FIGURE 11. A large bark shelter. Beswick, Arnhem Land.



FIGURE 12. Another view of the large bark shelter, Beswick.



FIGURE 13. Painted bark shelter. Bulman Gorge, Central Arnhem Land.



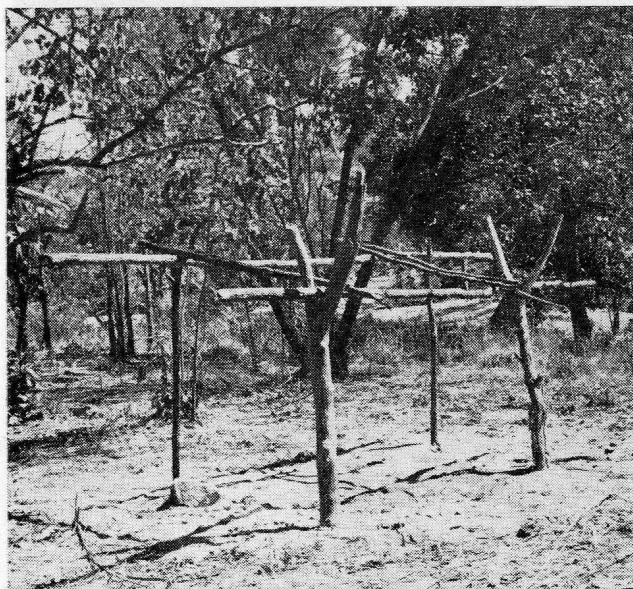
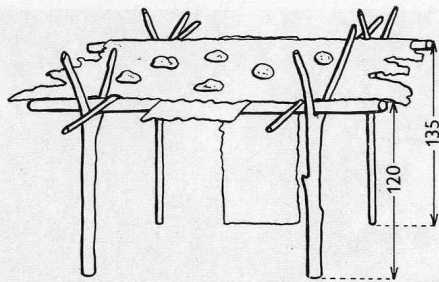


FIGURE 14. *Axonometric view and simple plan of the painted bark shelter. Bulman Gorge, Central Arnhem Land.*

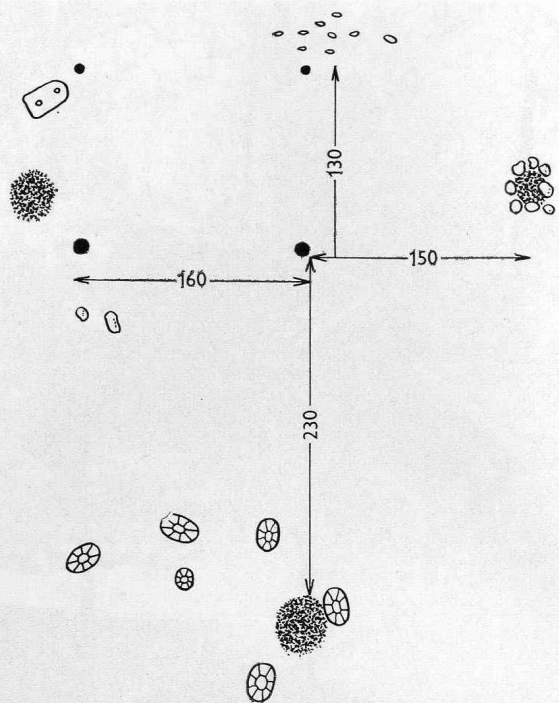


FIGURE 15. *Skeleton of the painted bark shelter. Central Arnhem Land.*



FIGURE 16. *Another view of the painted bark shelter. Central Arnhem Land.*

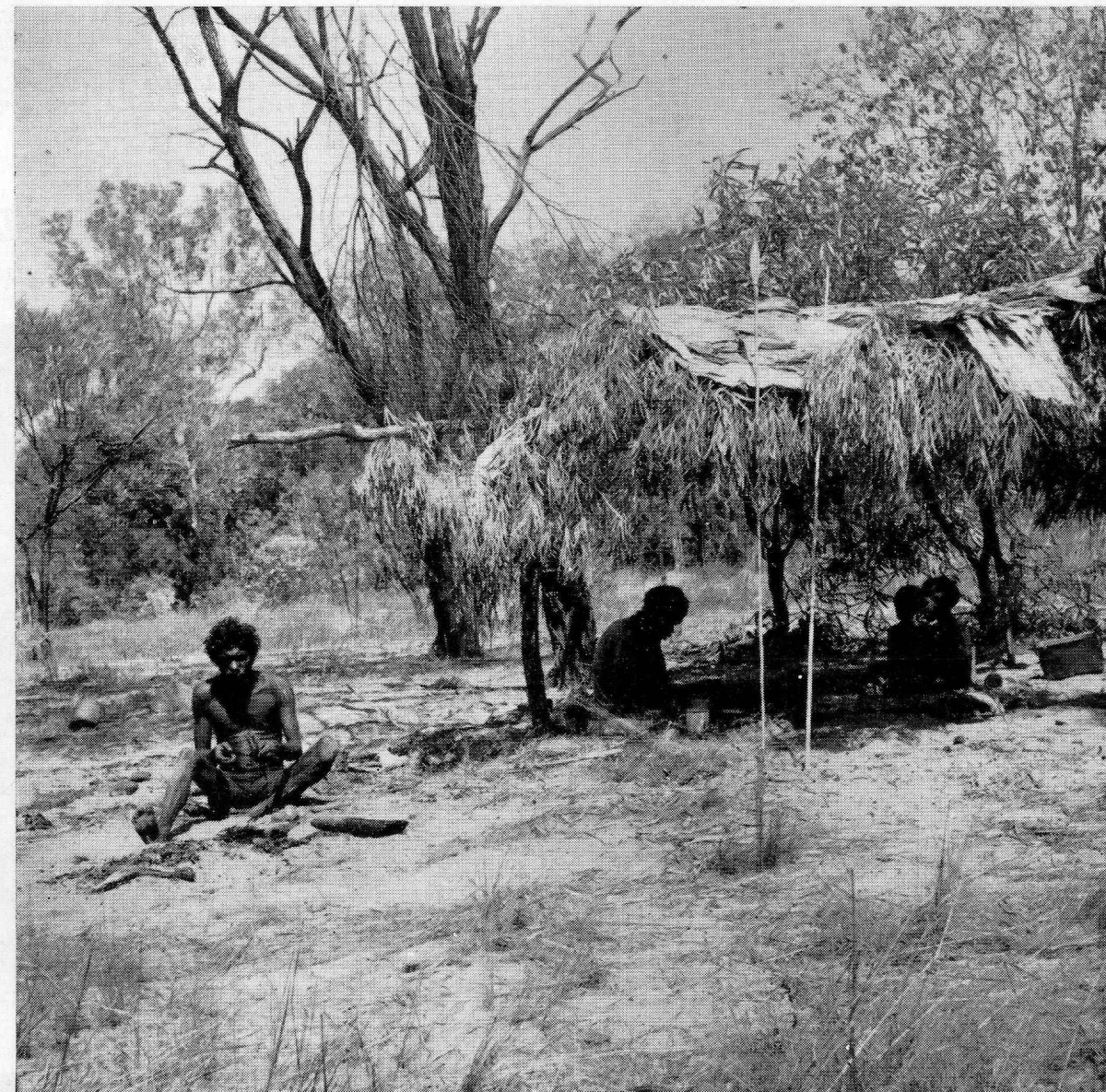


FIGURE 17. *Bark shelter covered with eucalyptus branches and paper bark. Upper Cadell River, Central Arnhem Land.*



FIGURE 18. *A small flat fireplace with some heating stones. It served the purpose of preparing food. (Bulman Gorge painted bark shelter, fig. 15.)*



FIGURE 19. Another small flat fireplace with tortoise carapaces. (Bulman Gorge painted bark shelter, figs. 13, 15).

FIGURE 20. A dugout fireplace with some heating stones and a piece of paper bark to cover the cooked food. Beswick.

FIGURE 21. A dugout fireplace after cooking a kangaroo. Note the heating stones. Upper Cadell River.

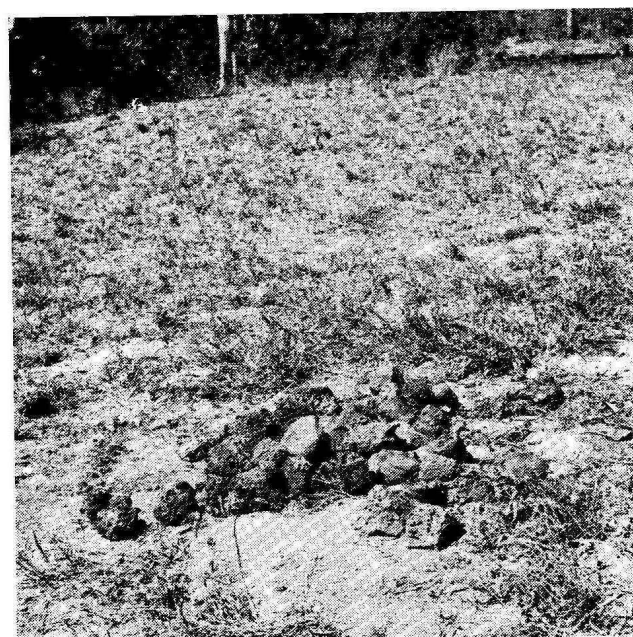


FIGURE 22. The Aborigines sometimes put pieces of termite mounds into the fire to get a long-lasting glow. Beswick.



FIGURE 23. Some heating stones from a prehistoric fireplace. Upper Wilton River, Central Arnhem Land.

a source of warmth and protection from mosquitoes at night. Another fireplace, 150 cm away from the shelter, contained burnt stones. It served the purpose of preparing food. Around the third fireplace, 230 cm away from the shelter, there were eight tortoise carapaces, i.e. remains of food. As there is a rock wall and a cave with paintings not far from the shelter and as the dimensions of the shelter indicate that it served to a single inhabitant it seems probable that the stay in it was of some ritual importance.

Summing up our observations, we may state that bark shelters of two types are found in Arnhem Land (northern Australia), viz., with a flat roof and open, and with a gable-roof resting on the ground and thus more closed. Besides, a marked adaptation of the Aborigines to climate in dry and rainy periods is seen

in their using overhanging rocks as shelters. Also characteristic is the utilization of local materials, especially bark of two *Eucalyptus* spp., in shelter construction.

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