The preparation and wholesale distribution of the narcotic pitfuri or pitcheri,¹ was in the hands of the descendants of the man who first discovered its narcotic properties. The preparation was a close monopoly and any child born to the horde or tribe who belonged to the pitcheri Moora automatically succeeded to all rights and privileges in the distribution.

The secret of preparation was jealously guarded by the old men; the younger men were only allowed to accompany the party to the water nearest to the small clump of trees that were deemed to be the only true pitcheri. Here the younger men and the women stayed and prepared the bags to hold the prepared pitcheri and gathered food for the old men who did the harvesting. The old men went on to the trees, made a camp and built big fires. While these were burning down sufficiently they picked branch tips of the pitcheri bush, each about twelve inches at most in length. These were placed in a hole formed by raking out the fires down to the hard sand, and, completely covered with hot sand, were left to cook for at least two hours. When the steamed pitcheri was considered to be sufficiently cooked the sand was raked off and it was placed on a pirra to cool and dry. When thoroughly dry, it was beaten with the edge of a boomerang to break it up; all big twigs were picked out and the clean tips bagged.

The great secret lay in the length of time that was needed for the steaming, and this was not taught the men until their beards were grey. When they were a "little bit Pinnaru," that is, when the grey first showed in their hair and beard they might be allowed to accompany the old men to the picking ground, and would be [373] allowed to fill the bags with the prepared pitcheri, but the actual cooking was clone cut of their sight. Sometimes, if the ground was hard, a hole was dug and the fire built in that, sometimes the fire was made close to a sandhill, and the sand was raked down from above. The method varied but the result was the same; too much steaming made the resulting "cook" brittle and tasteless, too little made it musty.

The pitcheri tree, Duboisa hopwoodi, grew in an area which extended from about due west of Bedourie, down to about opposite Birdsville, just over the Queensland border. Down to the south the trees were reckoned kudna, i.e. rotten, or no good. I do not know why, but possibly some constituent in the soil was the cause, or the original discoverer may have discouraged any imitators by bluffing them. There were two trees on a ridge about ten miles out from Sandringham Station which were very stunted and bedraggled specimens every young blackfellow who passed by tried to make proper pitcheri from them, but through not knowing the secret of the cooking failed to do any good.

A great trouble to investigators is the lack of words in time aboriginal language; the one word pitcheri had to deal with the whole subject; the bush, Acacia salicina, in this country (Lake Eyre district) was more often known as pitcheri than by its native name wirra. The ashes resulting from burning wirra bush tips were always known as pitcheri. So that any one asking would be shown perhaps half a dozen trees which would all be quite truly called pitcheri, although they only supplied supplementaries to the real substance.

The great trade routes that met and crossed at Koparra-murra, the Kopperamanna of the white
people, was one of the big distributing centres, although the pitcheri had probably changed hands several times before it got there. Crowds would be waiting at Annandale, on the Herbert, for the collectors to come in, and getting as much as they could, would make off to Birdsville, Bedourie, Urandangie, and down the Herbert; here other people would be waiting to take it down the Diamantina to Goyder's Lagoon, where others in turn would be waiting, gathered in from east and west, some from as far [374] as the Darling, and in good seasons from the lower Finke. I have seen over 500 aborigines waiting at Goyder's Lagoon.

The next important trading place was Kopparmurra; here the trade route from William Creek came in; tribesmen came in carrying on their heads the flat stones for crushing the softer seeds used for food; these were greatly in demand by the Yaurorka and Yantruwunta, who lacked stone in their country. Others came up from the south with the precious red ochre—the blood of Marindie, the dog who was killed in the great fight with Arndno-artina, the gecko, at Parachilna. There was great demand for the red ochre because most of the ceremonial painting was done with it. I could never understand, however, why our own tribes (Lower Cooper etc.) valued the Parachilna red ochre, for red ochre was very plentiful about Mungeranie, in the heart of their own country.

Down to Kopperamanna came the traders loaded up to capacity with pitcheri and weapons which they had picked up on the way down and a time of great activity ensued; trading was kept up until everyone was satisfied and left for home, but as parties were arriving all through the months of the cool weather the market was open all the time.

Howitt mentions that sometimes the name pitcheri was given to a boy. Actually every boy who belonged to the pitcheri moora had a right to the name; it corresponded with our surname; the oldest man was Pitcheri Pinnaru, that is chief old man of the Pitcheri clan; others were called from any distinguishing feature, as in the instance quoted by Howitt, Pitcheri Coono Milkie (one-eyed Pitcheri).

The last of the descendants of this clan was a bit of a Puritan and objected to the name; changing this to Peter, he raged around the country up to ten years ago fighting any native who dared to call him Pitcheri.

I very much doubt that pitcheri was ever used as a poison, or that the aboriginal knew anything of poisons; it is so totally foreign [375] to their pre-white psychology; they certainly would not eat an emu that had been poisoned or stupefied with arty narcotic. They will not eat fish which have been washed out by the river floods, or birds or animals killed by the heat in summer; they are terribly afraid of anything that has died apparently without any cause and will not touch it or go near it if this can be avoided. Further, pitcheri was so valued that I cannot imagine a native having so much of it that he would waste it on attempting to catch even an emu. In any case there was other herbage available for such practical purposes. Thus, the wooden bowls in which water was stored or carried were always filled with herbage of some sort to prevent slopping; this was not a matter of an odd twig or two such as I have seen city campers put in their billycans, for the bowl was filled to its capacity, giving the impression that it was filled with herbage first, and then with water. Any herbage was used; mindry bush was favoured, in its season, but anything that did not make the water too unpleasant to taste would do.

Another use of herbage in the water was as a trap for shrimps bushes of any sort were placed in the shallow water along the edges of the big holes, and the shrimps congregating in the shelter of these could be caught easily. Herbage was also used to push fish out of shallow holes; a wall of herbage was built up in the shallows at one end of the hole to a height of about six inches above the water; the whole wall was then pushed right along the hole and the fish were pushed out at the other end. It is hardly likely, however, that the precious pitcheri bush was used for these purposes.
The bags which were used to hold the pitcheri were made of fibre string, usually made from the verbena that grows in the swamp country of the Diamentina and Georgina rivers, and from the broome bush that grows on the sandhills. This was twisted into string and dyed with red and yellow ochre and sometimes with the blue clay found in the Diamentina. Occasionally hair string was used, but not generally.

To make the bag, a chain of stitches was made, perhaps ten inches long, and a quill was prepared, from which all of the feather was stripped with the exception of about an inch on the top; this was teased out and woven into the end of the string; the length of chain stitching was then joined into a circle and the making of the bag was commenced by pushing the quill up through a loop from underneath, then over and down through its own loop and up again, following around the loop of chain stitch until a circular mat was made; to tighten up a circle or loosen it out stitches were dropped or added; as one length of string was used up, the quill would be woven into another length, usually of a different colour, and so on until the bag was big enough. Then the mat was folded over and stitched up nearly its whole length, leaving an opening of about six inches, in a big bag; through this opening the prepared pitcheri was stuffed, after which the opening was sewn up. The resulting pasty shaped bags varied considerably in size; the largest I have seen were about three feet long, and the smallest about six inches.

Bartering started at the first camp that was met after leaving the pitcheri grounds; after everybody had rested and fed, one of the party would throw down a bag in front of the assembled camp anyone who wished to buy would throw down, perhaps a couple of boomerangs, perhaps a grinding mill, or whatever he could spare the pitcheri seller would leave his bag until something that he wanted was offered; this he would accept by picking it up and the buyer would then pick up the bag of pitcheri. Perhaps another member of the pitcheri party would see something in the goods offered and would throw down another bag; if the buyers were not satisfied they would pick up their offerings, and if the seller was not satisfied he would pick up his bag of pitcheri. The camps near the pitcheri grounds never became big markets because the pitcheri was more valuable the farther away it was traded. The near camps were only used to get enough utensils and weapons for use when travelling to the more profitable markets.

There was a fairly big market about Birdsville 20 years ago. Men would come in there from the overland telegraph line, from Innamincka, Arrabury, Durham Downs, and some from near Broken Hill; they usually bought big lots. The sellers, after satisfying these buyers, would work on down to Goyder’s Lagoon; there was no hurry, a year or two, or a month or two was all one to the tribesmen.

Intrinsic value had nothing to do with the sales; it was quite likely that a big bag of pitcheri would be exchanged for a single boomerang, but it was just as likely to be exchanged for half a dozen boomerangs and perhaps a shield and a pirra; it always depended on what the buyer and seller wanted; sometimes when the seller had as much as he could carry he would give a bag in exchange for food for his party.

In the Lake Eyre district the ash of the line tips of the branches of the Acacia salicina were used to mix with the pitcheri. These tips were carefully picked, anything wormy, wind-burnt or diseased was discarded; the tips, never more than about nine inches long, were tied in bundles, ignited over the fire and then allowed to burn out while held over a wooden bowl; then a little fresh pitcheri was mixed in with the old chew and the whole lot well rubbed in the ashes in the bowl. Fresh pitcheri was not liked so well as a chew that had been in use for a day or so; it was passed from man to man and when not being chewed it was usually stowed behind the car. The skin of some of the old people was bleached a queer blue-grey with the saturated juices.
Pitcheri had very little apparent effect on the old people who had been in the habit of using it for years, but it gave the young people a swollen bestial look; one young woman I remember at Mungeranie had the appearance of being heavily drugged with opium; her eyes were swollen, her mouth loose and sloppy and she spoke as if in a drunken daze. The effect wore off and the next morning she was apparently normal.

It has been increasingly difficult of late years to get properly prepared pitcheri and now only a few of the old people think of it, but those who know it will willingly forego tobacco for it; one old woman who lived all her life on a Mission begged some of me when she came across a small bag one day while cleaning up. I gave her some and she begged the whole lot from me; it is the only thing, so far as I can remember, that she ever asked for.

Notes

1) The popular spelling pitcheri has been retained in the article; the phonetic spelling would be pitferi or pitsuri. Pirra is often popularly spelt pirrha. Moora, phonetically spelt, would be mura. -Ed.


3) The moora is really in this sense a patrilineal totemic cult clan, and not a hero. -Ed.