

Possum Skin Cloak

FACT SHEET

www.wirraminna.org/drdave-outback/

When you are cold you find some clothes to put on to help keep you warm and dry. In today's world we use available materials to make jumpers, coats and pants to help protect us from the cold, wind and rain.

The traditional Aboriginal people of the Murray-Darling Basin were no different. They used available materials to make clothing that would keep them warm and dry. Wiradjuri Elder, Aunty Nancy Rooke, explains that 'possum skin cloaks' were how her ancestors would have kept dry and warm during the colder months.

These incredibly warm coats were made from numerous possum skins and were seen as a point of pride and status within the tribe. Individuals would make their mark on the coats, decorating them to represent who they were, where they were from and what tribe they were part of. These symbolic markings would also let others know who the cloak belonged to.

When the tribe moved place, went walkabout or the weather warmed up, the bulky coats would sometimes be left behind, being stored for future use. The people would roll their possum skin cloak up and leave it in a hollow log. Other tribes could even use the coat when they moved through the area but they would put it back for the tribe to whom it belonged.

Possum skin cloaks were used for ceremony, trade and even to wrap newborn babies in to protect them from the elements. Some cloaks were treasured so much that they were either buried with their owner or handed down to the next generation as a type of heirloom.



Left: Possum skins sewn together with twine made from native bee wax.

Right: Possum skin cloak at the Melbourne Museum.

Photos: PeeKdesigns

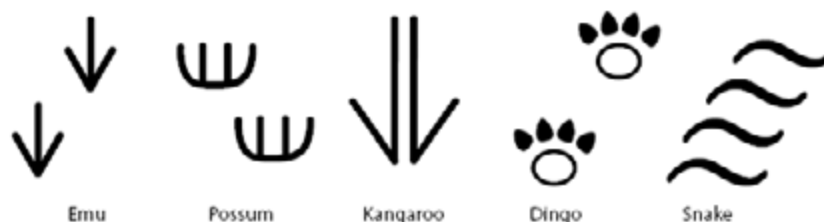
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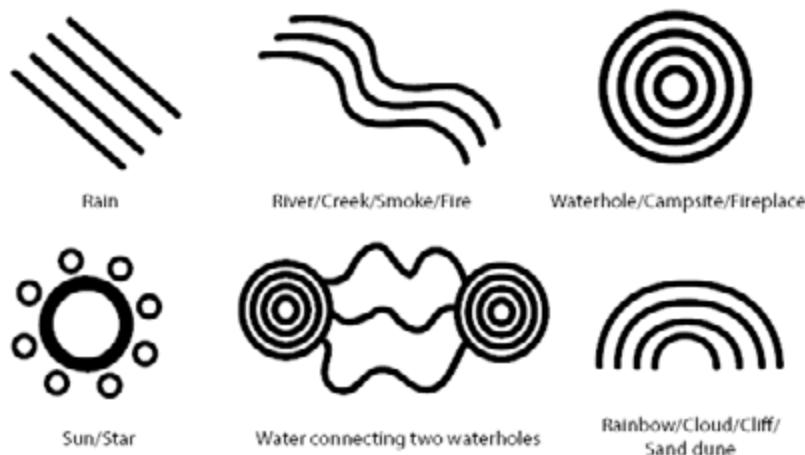
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Possum skin cloaks were decorated with symbols to tell stories about that person, their country and totem. Here are some common symbols used by NSW Aboriginal Nations, such as Wiradjuri, to tell stories.

Animal Signs



Environmental Signs



Human Occupation Signs



Source: PeeKdesigns

For more information about the different symbols used:

www.aboriginalartstore.com.au/aboriginal-art-culture/aboriginal-symbols-glossary/

www.deadlyartonline.com/resources/symbols.htm

art-educ4kids.weebly.com/aboriginal-art-and-patterning.html

www.aboriginal-dreamtime.net2go.info/Aboriginal/Aboriginal_Symbole.htm

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ACTIVITIES

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1. The scientific names of six different possum species that can be found in the Murray River area have been provided below. You need to find out what their common name is as well as a distinguishing feature that helps you identify it.

SCIENTIFIC NAME	COMMON NAME	FEATURE/S
<i>Acrobates pygmaeus</i>		
<i>Burramys parvus</i>		
<i>Petaurus breviceps</i>		
<i>Petaurus norfolcensis</i>		
<i>Pseudocheirus peregrinus</i>		
<i>Trichosurus vulpecula</i>		

2. Possum skin cloaks hold strong sentimental value (pride) to the person who made it, as well as being a symbol of status. Why would this be?
3. Possum skin cloaks were marked with symbols of the person to whom it belonged. These symbols told stories about that person's country and their totem. Use the symbols provided on the fact sheet, or invent your own, to design a story that you would put on a possum skin cloak.
4. In traditional times, possums were hunted for food and the use of their skins was a way of utilising the whole animal - nothing went to waste. Today, possums are protected in Australia and it is illegal to go out and hunt them.

A full-length possum skin cloak can use many possum skins (up to 80). If it is illegal to hunt possums in Australia, where can Aboriginal people get the skins to make traditional cloaks? One option is that they can be imported from New Zealand.

Research the reasons why possum skins can be imported from New Zealand.