

THE SEASONS AND SEASONAL MARKERS OF THE TIWI PEOPLE
OF NORTH AUSTRALIA

by P.M. Stevenson

Tribal Aboriginal people with a close intimate contact with their country for thousands of years have devised a loose but detailed systems of seasons and seasonal markers which enable them to identify ceremonial periods and to follow hunting sequences with reasonable precision.

These seasons and seasonal markers I have followed for more than five years among the Tiwi people of Bathurst and Melville Islands. These islands constitute a landmass of about 8000 sq.km., some 50 km north of Darwin in the Northern Territory and are still the undisputed preserve of the Tiwi tribe who number some 1500 people. The Tiwi still refer to the traditional seasons as they have retained many of the traditional customs and frames of reference.

DEPICTING SEASONS GRAPHICALLY

As the movement of the earth around the sun is cyclic therefore our seasons are cyclic and we can depict them as parts of a circle, so that for each calendar month we can use a 30° sector, as in Fig 1.

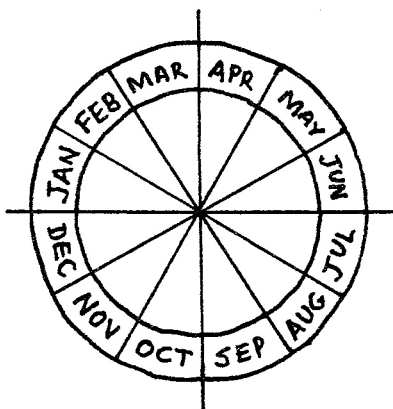


Fig 1. The Cyclic Year.

Obviously the seasons vary from year to year, as Bureau of Meteorology records will show but the seasons can be generalised as occupying specific periods. In the temperate zones (of the Southern Hemisphere) the seasons which are based mainly on temperature differences could be depicted as in Fig 2.

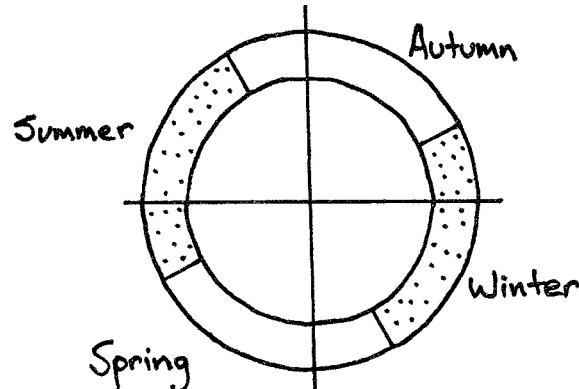


Fig 2. Temperate Zone Seasons of the Southern Hemisphere.

However, in the monsoonal climate of northern Australia the seasons used by the Europeans are distinguished by the relative rainfall and humidity (see Fig 3). It is interesting that there are three major seasons the Tiwi people recognise that conform closely with the three used by the Europeans (see Fig 4).

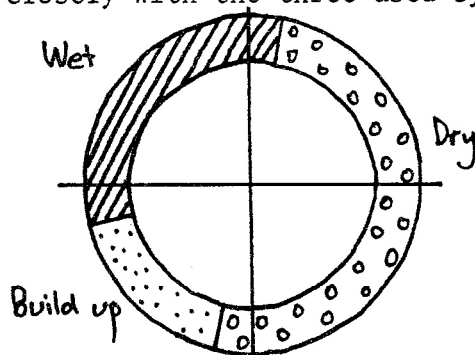


Fig 3. Monsoonal Seasons used by Europeans.

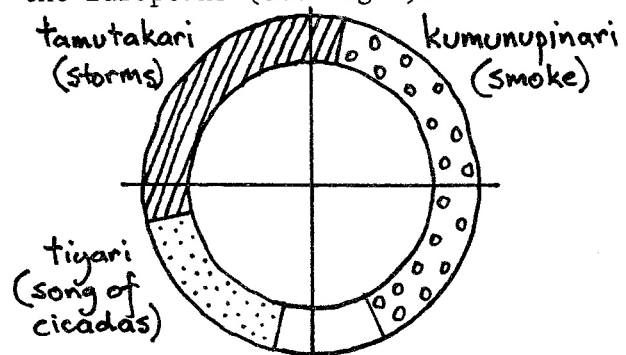


Fig 4. Monsoonal Seasons used by the Tiwi.

The terminology used by the Tiwi people is simple and efficient. The noun of the seasonal marker has the suffix "-ari" added to indicate the season during which that marker occurs e.g. *tamutakari* is the season of *tamutaka* (storms).

A monsoon climate and its impact on the environment is most difficult to visualise unless experienced. With temperatures in the thirties ($^{\circ}\text{C}$) all year, the major limiting factor in the growth of vegetation is rainfall. After seven months of virtually no rain *tamutakari* (season of storms), with up to 2500 mm (100") of rain in five months, produces lush tropical growth. When this finishes the vegetation dries and is deliberately fired by the Aboriginal people, hence *kumunupinari* (season of smoke). Before the next season of storms there is a hot, humid month or two when the cicadas emerge and their characteristic shrill song is heard, hence *tiyari* (season of the song of the cicada).

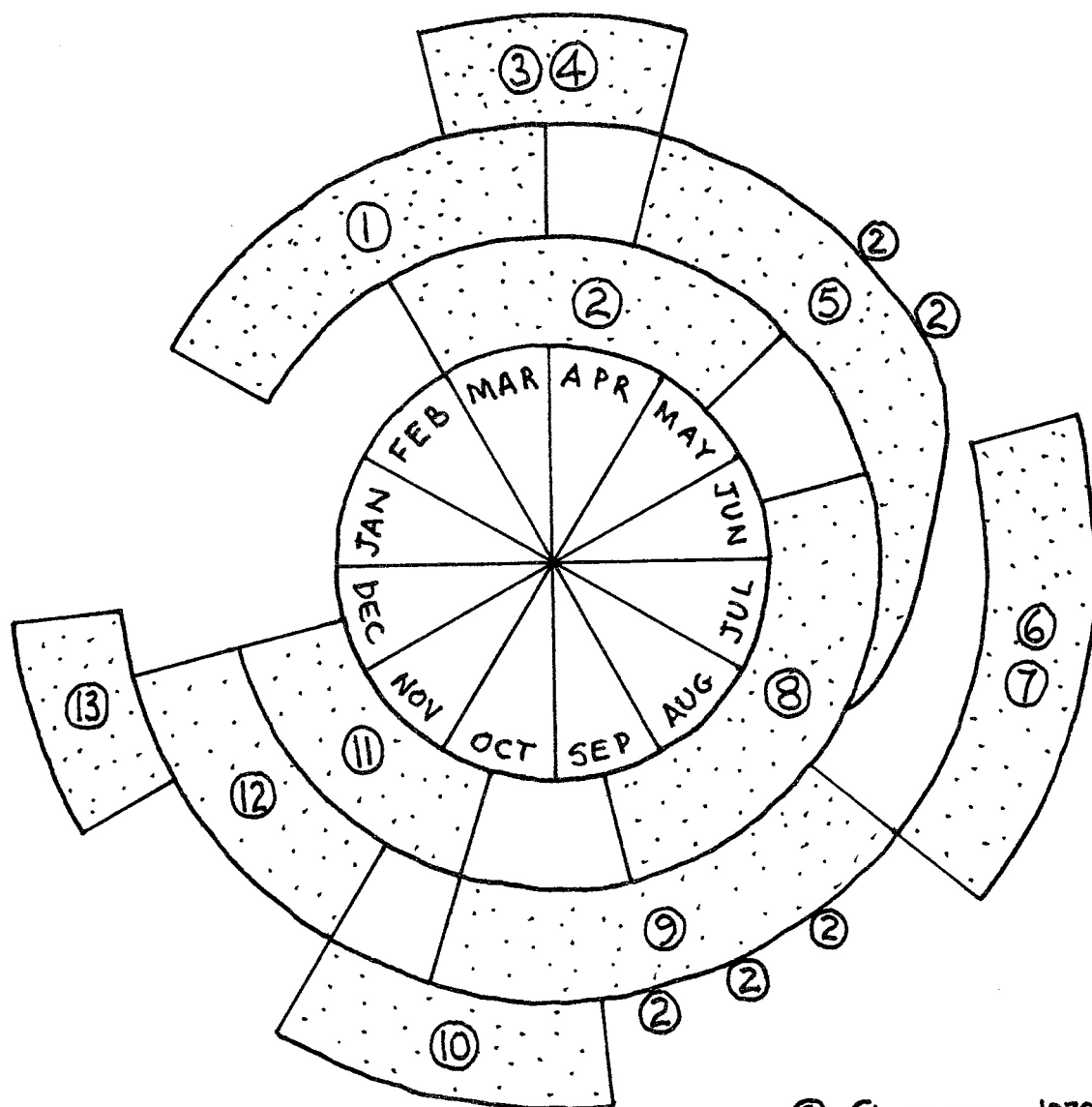
The minor seasons, some only as short as a week, are based on environmental events that are characteristic of that time of the year. As many of these overlap they need to be portrayed on several levels so that they can be easily distinguished (See Fig 5).

MINOR SEASONS

Starting at the beginning of the year the first minor season is *tawutawungari* (season of the clap sticks), during which the *kurlama* ceremonies are held and the oral tradition of the tribe is remembered and extended. These ceremonies centre around the *kurlama*, a yam that is prepared, baked and eaten only at this time.

As the end of the wet season approaches many of the trees and shrubs flower resulting in an obvious and extended *wurrijingari* (season of flowers). Many plants flower at this time so that the seeds can be prepared during the long dry season to sprout with the first rains of the wetseason.

There are several short periods during the year when individual trees are in flower, which do not coincide with the season of flowers. These trees are all of importance as food or medicine and each specific flowering season is named after the plant or its fruit e.g.



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| 1. <i>tawutawungari</i> (clap sticks) | 6. <i>yirriwinari</i> , <i>munuputari</i> (cold) |
| 2. <i>wurrijingari</i> (flowers) | 7. <i>kumwari</i> (fog) |
| 2. flowering times of special plants | 8. <i>pumutingari</i> (wind that flakes skin) |
| 3. <i>marrakatari</i> (tall grass) | 9. <i>yartupwari</i> (dry creek bed) |
| 4. <i>wurringawunari</i> (knock-em-downs) | 10. <i>milikitorinari</i> (hot feet) |
| 5. <i>kimirrakinari</i> (fire) | 11. <i>pumwanyingari</i> (thunder) |
| | 12. <i>kurukurari</i> (breeding mangrove worm) |
| | 13. <i>mumpikari</i> (muddy possum tracks) |

Fig 5. Minor Seasons of the Tiwi Calendar

jimijingari (season of the diarrhea medicine plant - Persoonia falcata), *jarrikarlinari* (season of the big wattle tree - Acacia auriculoformis).

Two short seasons indicate the end of the wet season *marrakatari* (season when the tall grass flowers) and *wurringawunari* (season of the knock-em-downs). Every year at this time one of the tall wet season grasses (Sorghum plumosum) breaks into a large brown seed head which also signals the arrival of other seasonal markers - migrating birds e.g. Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike and the Rainbowbird. Sometimes before and sometimes after the arrival of these birds strong storms knock the grasses down into a compact mass. This is why everyone in the north calls these storms the "knock-em-downs".

When the last rain falls in mid April the compacted grasses cure and are fired by the people, resulting in *kimirrakinari* (season of fire). This deliberate firing of the countryside has been a universal Aboriginal practice throughout Australia (recorded by nearly all explorers from the time of Dampier onwards) but it is not random as can be assumed by observing it. Each firing has a known result - how long the fire will last, how far it will go, what it will burn and what plants will grow afterwards. This knowledge of fire and its effects is used as a cultural tool to improve the availability of the major food animals - wallabies. The fires reduce the cover for these animals, hunting and travelling generally is much easier. Also immediate regrowth of grasses is encouraged as there is still considerable soil moisture available, enough to provide a good green pick to fatten the wallabies.

As the middle of the year approaches the temperatures at night do fall to 15 - 20°C. This period is called *yirriwinari* or *munuputari* (season of cold) and everyone sleeps close to a fire at night. Sometimes when the temperatures are low fogs develop along the valleys and creeklines in the morning, hence *kumwari* (season of fogs).

Strong consistent winds are characteristic of the whole dry season (it is the season for yachting in northern waters) and a time is designated as *pumitingari* (the season when our skin flakes like ashes). The background noise of wind in the trees allows good hunters to get very close to their quarry and this is generally a plentiful time of the year.

To hunter-gathering people who move camp regularly throughout the year the drying up of good watering points is significant because it reduces the number of potential campsites and concentrates the water dependent animals at certain times of the day. The strong winds dry the creeks into chains of waterholes and these are later reduced into dry creek beds during *yartupwari* (season of the dry creek bed).

In September and October both the maximum and minimum temperatures rise and the hard packed earth, which is often burnt black, heats quickly during the day. This time is called *milikatorinari* (season of hot feet) and food gathering is often concentrated in the mangroves and jungle patches instead of the dry plains and woodland.

Then starts the "build up" to the next wet season with *pumwanyingari* (season of thunder). As the humidity and humidity increase cumulus clouds develop every afternoon and there is often thunder and spectacular lightning displays at night, but little rain. Around the north coast of Western Australia and the eastern coast of the Northern Territory which have flat continental shelves and large tides (sometimes 8m or more) the weather at this time is particularly oppressive because the low king tides exposes many miles of sand and mudflat to the hot sun. The daily humidity range then rises to between 60 - 80%.

This is also the breeding season for a major marine food source of the Tiwi people - the mangrove worm. This worm is a wood borer up to 2cm thick and 1m long that eats long holes out of the centre of mangrove trees. These are easy to find, when you know how, and quite sweet and filling, when you can overcome the psychological barriers of eating large worms. *Kurukurari* (season of the breeding mangrove worm is also a time when other marine animals can be obtained easily or taste their best.

To complete the cycle of minor seasons there is *mumpikari* (season of muddy possum tracks). When the first rains fall and the possums (another favorite and abundant food source) return to their trees from foraging on the ground at night, they leave tell-tale muddy footprints on the trunk of the tree. This makes possum hunting easier and is a useful seasonal marker.

Then the wet season starts in earnest again with heavy storms, lush growth and within a month or two the first *kurlama* ceremonies begin *tawutawungari* (season of the clap sticks).

To most European Australians the apparent vaguaries of climate and weather are at worst fatal (as in sudden snowstorms in the Tasmanian summer) and at best a pleasant surprise. To tribal Aboriginal people climate and weather follow a well known sequence, each year with its peculiar variations of rainfall and strong winds. According to key environmental factors Aboriginal people change their lifestyle, their food sources and ceremonial activities, fine-tuning their lives to the environment. This is shown by the detail of seasons described by the old Tiwi people.

Maybe there is something in this for us to learn.