

## BONE POINTING MAGIC

One of the most powerful and fatal forms of magic practised by the aborigines is that of bone pointing. Every tribe with which the writer is acquainted uses some form of "pointing" magic, bone, wood, stone, hair, etc., prepared and consecrated by elaborate incantations, but amongst all these, a piece of bone from the small arm bone of a dead man is most deadly and swift in its effects.

Bone pointing has been practised amongst all primitive peoples. Finger pointing, the finger held outstretched in front of the eyes, is still practised in some parts of Ireland to avert the deadly "evil eye," or to project evil into the enemy, or into his beasts, and the belief in the magical power of the bone still exists in Southern Ireland where the bone of a beast which had been bewitched by the evil eye was hung up in the wide chimney as a protection against future bewitchment.

Amongst the aborigines of the Central areas, bone pointing is active and continuous. In every local group there is at least one powerful magic bone, specific terms being used to denote the age and power of the bone.

Ulalya darrga (ancestral spirit bones) are the most ancient and powerful of all aboriginal magic bones. One of these bones was presented to H.R.H. by an old native from the Glen Ferdinand area near the Northern Territory border. It was about three inches in length, flat, pointed at both ends, of a beautiful deep ivory colour. The writer witnessed a ceremony which is sometimes performed in connection with the transfer of the magic bone. The old holder and owner of the spirit bone, feeling that his vitality was leaving him, called to his brother to come near, and when the brother sat down beside him, the old man said, "You must take and keep the burmu now and I will give you the ulalya that is inside me." The bone was then held with the pointed ends at the breast of each man (the only time that the points are harmless) and as the old man held it firmly with one hand,



he pinched and pulled the ulalya from his body just below the ribs, running his closed hand along the bone and flattening the hand against the breast of his brother. He performed this act several times until "he felt his inside empty." The brother then took the ulalya burnu, and going into a place apart, he sat silent for a while until he felt that he had absorbed the spirit of the bone, or rather the "shadow" of the spirit. He then returned to his camp, "different" in the sight of the others, and on his brother's death he took chief place in the burial and mourning ceremonies, cut off his dead brother's hair, etc. It will be noted that the bone does not descend to a son, but to a brother. Not only was the ulalya transmitted in this way, but any other special powers the elder brother possessed went with the ulalya.

This bone was polished to a degree of fineness which the most expert present day diamond cutter could not excel. There were no human-made markings on the ulalya darrga but every minute dark spot or line showing within or upon its surface registered a death. How many hundreds of generations had helped to give the bone its smooth polish and how many deaths it had accomplished, who can say? Its old and last owner stated that it had killed waddi jurda and kungga jurda (many men and many women) in his day. He had inherited it from an elder brother who had again inherited it from an elder brother and so on back into the darkness.

Each owner of the ulalya darrga used the hereditary incantations over it when it came into his possession. As he incanted the shadow of the ulalya in the darrga (bone) went inside him and was added to his other magic powers, which were all located within his breast. The darrga was then wrapped in emu feathers and hair string made preferably from the hair of a dead brother and was carried either in the hair or hair band or worn on special occasions attached to a neck string, the pendant bone at the back of the neck.



When a member of this local group died, (a local group is the aggregate of local individual families) whatever the real cause of death might have been, it was attributed to magic, and after the mourning ceremonies were over, the ulalya darrga was set in motion. Its owner took it to a secluded spot, sacred from women and children, and placing it on some clean branches, pointed it in the direction from which the other death magic had come, singing softly the while the old incantation (which however has no reference to the intended victim's "eyes and liver," etc.) The pointing goes on until some feeling within the owner's breast tells him that the death magic has gone forth, so picking up the ulalya darrga he replaces it in its covering and returns to camp to await the result. Time being of no account to the aborigines, months, years, or happily only days may elapse before the death magic reaches its victim and enters his vitals, killing him slowly or quickly as the case may be.

Now that victim may even be a member of the local group, but whoever it is, he is counted responsible for the death that has brought about his own. His family may possess an object of magic with which they will try to do mischief in return, but the power of the ulalya darrga being supreme, their "faith" in the lesser magic fails before it, and to work without "faith" is useless.

The next most powerful bone is the miri burnu (dead man's spirit bone), also a piece of the small arm bone, about four inches long, rounded, with long pointed ends, one of which may have been charred to give it "fire magic," or an end may be dipped in the blood of the dead man which gives it blood magic. This however is only in the case of a man having been fatally wounded and bleeding from his wound. The fire magic within the bone burns up the intestines, the blood magic makes its victim jundara arlgulu (vomit blood) until his body is empty of blood, when his death follows. The miri burnu is also an old and highly polished bone, of a murky yellow tint, an evil looking object, and one held in great and ever present fear by the native.



The miri burmu belonging to the three last members of the one time numerous mallee hen totem group at Boundary Dam, was presented to the writer with grave ceremony after much diplomatic work in connection with its custody and whereabouts, as the presence of these objects of evil magic is always disturbing, especially among the present day "mobs" which are formed from the remnants of various groups, no one group being able to muster a dozen fighting males. When it is known or suspected that one or more of these little mobs is in possession of a burmu, the whole camp is in a state of nervous tension. The men fear to go far afield for dingo or other game, or to let their women go too far rabbiting and iguana hunting and so the first task is to locate the burmu, and then "barter" for this.

Eight men accompanied the bone to my camp early one morning, and seating themselves under an acacia (Thalyuru) tree, quietly awaited my coming, the women remaining at a spot about a quarter of a mile away. A fire was lighted by Jajjala and some small green branches were gathered and upon these the miri burmu was placed, south of the fire and pointing north and south. "We have brought you the miri burmu of the Ngannamurra waddi (mallee hen)," they said, "It is very powerful and many men and women have been killed by it. See, here are two little marks where it has killed two men." As I picked up the dreaded object a quite perceptible feeling of relief appeared on the faces of the men, for a death had taken place at another camp only the week before the transfer of the miri burmu, and the possession of the bone was rather a doubtful honour to the holder, especially in these mob-mixing days. The thalyuru under which we had been seated was cut down and the slope where the fire had been was temporarily closed to the women.

The ulalya darrga and miri burmu are also called "jilbi ba," meaning "old men" - a term which is also applied secretly to the oldest of the sacred totem boards and is not even heard by young initiated men until they have begun to "qualify for eldership."



Some pointing bones are carried and used in pairs, and are alluded to as "guri yarra" (married couple, man and wife), one being the mama (father) the other kungga (woman). Kungga burnu is long, rounded and pointed and is sometimes notched with an initiation knife to mark the deaths it is answerable for. The mama burnu is flat with rounded ends, but both are equally effective and either may kill a man or woman, neither bone specializing in the sex of its victims. These bones are pointed in pairs so that if one fails the other is sure to bring down its victim. One pair of guri yarra had six recent deaths to its account before its murderous vendetta came to an end.

A loud cry of utmost fear comes suddenly from the man or woman who believes that a bone has been "put inside" him or her and if there is no old and active sorcerer in camp whose immediate services can be secured there is no hope for the bone stricken victim. If the sorcerer is present he goes at once to the patient and watches intently the writhings of the body. If the bone has gone inside the liver, heart or intestines, the sorcerer sees the bone moving in these parts - all illness is due to the entry of some foreign body - diagnoses the seat of trouble, and either massages or sucks out the offending object, which may be a piece of bone, wood, string, stone, etc. When the patient sees the portion extracted and when he has obtained possession of it by immediate barter, he gets better at once, and placing the bit of bone in a small receptacle, he carries it about with him or buries it inside the bark of a tree.

Sometimes guri yarra burnu are worn openly amongst the men's group, but only when the owner has "many brothers" in the group and when he is a brave man, for only a brave man would lay himself open to secret bone pointing due to his possession of the bones.

The fear of the bone and other magic is inherent in all natives, wild or ultra civilised though they may be. The writer remembers two old natives, one of whom had been an Anglican for 50 years and instructed at Bishop Hale's native mission on the Swan, the other a Roman Catholic, born and reared at Nyeerrgu



Water (New Norcia) beside which Bishop Salvado started his mission in 1846. The Anglican believed that he had intercepted and caught fire magic intended for another man in the camp who was supposed to have been responsible for the death of a woman which had occurred some years ago at a place some 80 miles east, and the belief killed him although he was "the wrong man."

The Roman Catholic man whose totem was the dingo believed his death was due to blood magic sent by a group from the circumcised area north east of Victoria Plains, one of whose young men had died some little time previously. Blood and fire are the most fatal of all magic.

Every small group that comes into civilisation brings some magic with it, either the hair of some of its dead, which will give it warning of dangers, or bone magic, or a stone magical object of some kind, yet every group believes that the magic of the other group is not only more evil but also more powerful than its own. The fear of magic never leaves a native, no matter how educated and civilised he becomes. It is a religion of Fear with them and whatever other religion may be superimposed upon it, the ruling Fear is strong in death.

Amongst a large family group north east of Lake Way, consumption had unaccountably spread, men, women and children dying from the disease. Their number became less and less as the dread disease took its toll and as the men saw their sisters, brothers, daughters, mothers and fathers dying, after each death they raided the offending tribes north of them whom they considered responsible for the "blood magic." They killed many of the blood magic people both by raiding and by their own magic, but still their women and children caught the disease and died. Finally two brothers only were left of the group and on a killing expedition these two fell into the hands of the police and were sent to Rottnest Island Prison.

Consumption had already settled on the elder of the two and towards the end he said to the writer, "How strong and powerful the blood magic must have been to have travelled not only the long long way over the land but also over the great salt water



to come inside me and kill me." (Neither magic nor spirits are supposed to be able to "cross water.") Muri, his younger brother who was finally released from prison had scarcely reached his ancestral waters when he too succumbed to the disease. These men had a powerful and magic totem of their own - the initiation flint - which they could project into the intestines of their enemies, but for one death accomplished by the jimari (knife) so many resulted from the awful blood magic of the northern men, that the whole family group died out.

A magic bone may be secreted and left near a camp or in a native hut. It may be hidden in some place which the victim frequents. Wherever it is placed, the victim must come within the line of the point, otherwise the magic, which only goes out through the point, will pass by him. Hence the bone must always be carefully placed in position.

One of the reasons why a native will never re-occupy an old hut is his dread that magic may have been placed within it during his absence.

Each bone owner has his own method of placing and pointing the bone and will often sing to it, enlivening its magic. No magic bone can heal, for the bone holds killing magic only.

If anyone is caught bone pointing, or if the bone is found by someone else, someone in the group will die or be killed, for in all bone magic it is either "kill or be killed."