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BULLROARERS *used by the AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES.* By R. H. MATHEWS, L.S., Corresponding Member Anthropol. Inst. of Great Britain.

[WITH PLATE VI.]

THE bullroarer has played a prominent part in the ceremonies of various peoples, among whom may be mentioned the ancient Greeks, the North American Indians, some of the native tribes of Africa, and the Maoris of New Zealand. Its history in other countries will not, however, be discussed in this paper, the purport of which is simply to place before the reader a short description of the various forms of Australian bullroarers, accompanied by illustrative drawings. No comprehensive article of this character has hitherto appeared on the subject, so far as the writer is aware; and it is remarkable that even in our Australian Museums, all the different forms of bullroarers are not represented. In a number of papers on the initiation ceremonies¹ of various tribes, I have fully detailed the manner in which these instruments are employed on such occasions, which need not be again repeated in this memoir.

The bullroarers in use among the aborigines of Australia are generally made of a thin piece of wood, but occasionally of bark, and are of different sizes, varying in width from less than an inch to as much as 4 or 5 inches, and differing in length from about 4 inches to 2 feet, or even longer. They are made tapering at each end, and are somewhat thinner at the edges which are blunt, than in the middle. Some have serrated edges, like Fig. 5, while others are quite plain. Both sides of the instrument are generally convex, as in Figs. 6 and 10, but in some instances one side only is made convex, and the other either flat or slightly concave, as in Figs. 3, 4 and 15. In some cases a nick is made in the distal end of the bullroarer, resembling the letter V, as in Fig. 11. Others are ornamented on one or both sides by having devices carved upon them, similar to those seen on boomerangs, throwing sticks, and other native weapons (Figs. 1 and 2). Many of them are painted over with red ochre.

¹ "The Bora, or Initiation Ceremonies of the Kamilaroi Tribes," *Journ. Anthropol. Inst.*, xxiv, 411-427; *Ibid.*, xxv, 318-339. "The Bũrbũng of the Wiradthuri Tribes," *Journ. Anthropol. Inst.*, xxv, 295-318; *Ibid.*, xxvi, 266-279. "The Keeparra Ceremony of Initiation," *Journ. Anthropol. Inst.*, xxvi, 320-340.

They generally have a small hole at one end, through which is fastened a string, made either of the bark of certain trees, native flax, the fur of animals, or of human hair; and the string is sometimes as much as a dozen feet in length. In some tribes, instead of fastening the string through a hole, it is tied to the end of the bullroarer in much the same way that a whip is tied to a handle. When this form of fastening is used, one end of the bullroarer is made tapering to a long narrow point, on which a small knob is left, to which the long string is bound by means of a fine cord. (Figs. 7 and 8.) In other districts there is a nick in the small end of the bullroarer, in line with the hole and close to it, as in Figs. 12 and 13, for the purpose of facilitating the attachment of the string.

Bullroarers are usually made of a piece of straight wood, but specimens are not infrequently met with which have a slight spiral twist, due in most cases, no doubt, to the warping of the wood after it is made; but in some instances which have come under my notice, it was evident that the wood had always had a natural twist in it, which the native had either been unable to remove, or did not attempt it.

Before proceeding to describe the bullroarers observed by myself, it may be interesting to make a few selections from other works, for the purpose of giving my readers the descriptions recorded by various authors as the results of their own observations, some of them dating back about fifty years. These selections, it is hoped, will not be considered unnecessary, because some of the books from which they are taken are now out of print, and others are not accessible except in a few libraries. It is thought, moreover, that collating the information under one head, in the same book, will be found an advantage to the student. It should be stated, however, that the accounts of the bullroarers given in the works referred to, are of the most fragmentary and unsatisfactory character, being in some cases so indefinite as to throw uncertainty over the intended meaning. In making these quotations, I shall take some relating to each of the Australian colonies, and from localities widely separated, for the purpose of showing the universality of the use of the bullroarer at the initiation ceremonies of the aborigines throughout the continent.

Mr. C. Hodgkinson, in speaking of the initiatory rites among the blacks of the Macleay and Nambucca rivers, New South Wales, says: "Each man was provided with a singular instrument, formed of a piece of hollowed¹ wood fastened to a long

¹ The word "hollowed" is evidently intended to mean the hollowing out of one side of the instrument, like Fig. 15.

piece of flax string.”—“Australia from Port Macquarie to Moreton Bay” (1845), p. 232.

Mr. Isaac Nathan says that at the ceremony of the Kibbarah [Keeparra] in the district of Port Macquarie, New South Wales, a bullroarer was used. It was “a flat piece of wood about a foot long, notched all over,¹ with a hole in one end, through which passed a string of Kurrajong bark as a laniard.”—“Southern Euphrosyne” (1848), p. 100.

Mr. Charles Wilhelmi states that in the Port Lincoln district, County of Flinders, South Australia, this instrument was called *witarua*. It was made of a piece of wood 18 inches in length, 4 inches in breadth, and a quarter of an inch in thickness. It was tied to a long string, and the native swung it about his head, in such a manner as to produce a low rumbling sound at intervals, ceasing and returning at each effort of the performer.”—“Trans. Roy. Soc. Victoria” (1860), vol. v, p. 172.

In describing the customs of the Mycoolon tribe, Flinders River, Queensland, Mr. E. Palmer says: “The humming stick, called *mobolah*, used at Bora times only, is a flat piece of wood, 9 inches long, 2 inches broad, and thin, tied to another stick, to warn the gins not to approach. No woman is ever to see it, or any uninitiated youth.”—“Journ. Anthropol. Inst.,” xiii, p. 295.

Mr. A. L. P. Cameron in alluding to the Burbung ceremonies, among the Wiradjuri tribes on the Lachlan and Lower Murrumbidgee Rivers, New South Wales, describes the bullroarer as “a flat piece of wood, with serrated edges, and having a hole at one end to which a string was attached.”—“Journ. Anthropol. Inst.,” xiv, pp. 357 and 359.

Mr. A. W. Howitt says that among the Dieri tribes about Lake Eyre, South Australia, this instrument is called *yuntha*, and is from 4 to 6 inches long, a sixteenth of an inch thick, and from 2 to 2½ inches wide. It has notches at each side, and a small hole at one end, to which is attached a string about 10 or 12 feet long, made either of native flax or human hair.—“Journ. Anthropol. Inst.,” xx, p. 83.

In the Kimberley district of Western Australia, according to Mr. W. W. Froggatt, the bullroarer is used at the ceremony of circumcision. “The men are stationed round, whirling flat oval sticks, on which are carved curious symbols.”—“Proc. Linn. Soc. N.S. Wales,” iii, 2nd Series, p. 652.

At the Jeraeil or initiation ceremonies of the Kurnai tribe, Victoria, Mr. A. W. Howitt says that the bullroarer was used,

¹ This “notching” probably refers to the nicks in the edges only; if not, the instrument must have had marks cut upon its flat surface like those seen on message sticks.

and was there called *tündün*.—"Journ. Anthropol. Inst.," xiv, pp. 301 and 313.

Mr. Wyndham states that, among the aborigines of the western parts of New England, New South Wales, "the principal man who presided over the Bora made a most terrific noise with a piece of bark, having a string through it, cut something like a boomerang."—"Journ. Roy. Soc. N.S. Wales," xxiii, p. 38.

The Rev. W. Ridley in "Kamilaroi and Other Australian Languages," pp. 140-141, states:—"This old man (Billy, a very old black fellow of Burburgate¹) told me as a great favour that other blacks had withheld as a mystery too sacred to be disclosed to a white man, that *Dhurumbulum*, a stick or wand, is exhibited at the Bora, and that the sight of it inspires the initiated with manhood. This wand was the gift of Baiamai." At p. 156 he also says:—"A sacred wand, *Dhurumbulum*, given them by Baiamai, is exhibited; and the sight of this wand, as waved by the old men in the sight of the candidates, inspires manly qualities."

Mr. R. B. Smyth, in his "Aborigines of Victoria" (1878), vol. ii, p. 285, says on the authority of Mr. Ridley:—"Among the ceremonies of the Bora is the exhibition of a sacred wand, which they say was given to them by Baiamai, the sight of which is essential to impart manhood."

In the "Journal of the Royal Society of New South Wales" (1882), vol. xvi, p. 207, Dr. J. Fraser, in referring to the Bora, says: "At some part of the ceremony, he [the novice] is shown a sacred wand." At p. 216, he speaks of "the magic wand that Ridley mentions." Again at p. 217 he says: "The next step in the process of initiation is interesting; the *boombat* [novice] is shown a sacred wand." The same author, in "Aborigines of New South Wales" (1892), pp. 13 and 19, refers in somewhat similar terms to the "sacred wand."

There is no doubt in my mind that the "sacred wand" referred to by Mr. Ridley, and the other authors who have copied from him, is identical with the bullroarer. The great secrecy under which the information was imparted to Mr. Ridley agrees exactly with the mystery surrounding the use of that instrument; the uninitiated or the women are not permitted to see it, or to use it under pain of death. Although Mr. Ridley had given much attention to the languages and legends of the blacks, he does not seem to have been acquainted with the sacredness of the bullroarer, for we find that he makes no reference to any other sacred instrument except the "stick

¹ Burburgate is on the Namoi river about ten miles below Gunnedah, N.S.W., and is in the Kamilaroi country.

or wand." In narrating the information obtained from Mr. Hornery, he states that "Each youth took up a piece of string with a bit of wood at the end, which he whirled round, with a whizzing sound, three times." *Loc. cit.*, p. 154. I am inclined to think that if Mr. Ridley had known the important part assigned to the bullroarer in the ceremony, he would have recognised its identity with this "bit of wood at the end of a string," and would not have passed it over with this scanty allusion to it.

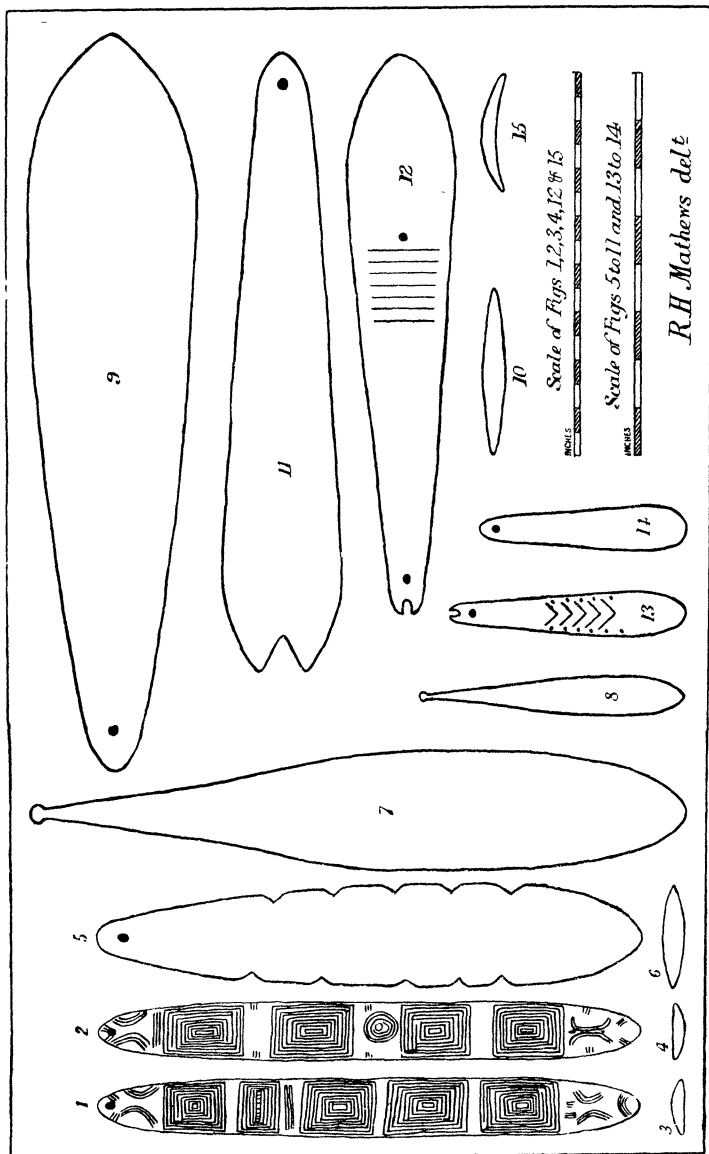
The "stick or wand" was "waved by the old men," which corresponds exactly with the way in which the bullroarer is used. It was "at the Bora" that it was "exhibited;" and it was "the gift of Baiamai," which further confirms its identity with the bullroarer. It is also stated that this "stick or wand" was called Dhurumbulum [Dhurramoolan], and that the blacks of Twofold Bay used this word for the name of their god (pp. 115 and 156). Among the Kamilaroi tribes who attended the Bora described by me in the "Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain," xxiv, p. 419, the bullroarer was called *murrawan*, and the alternative name Dhurramoolan; at the Burbung of the Wiradthuri tribes on the Macquarie and other rivers it is called *mudthega* as well as Dhurramoolan¹; and among the Gooreenggai blacks of the Paterson river it is known by the names of *mudthinga* and Dhurramoolan.

Among the three last mentioned tribes, Dhurramoolan is a dreaded evil being who is supposed to attend at the initiation ceremonies, and the sound of the bullroarer represents his voice, which is said to have resembled the rumbling of distant thunder, or the weird roar of the wind during a storm. Among the natives of the Macquarie and Bogan rivers, and other Wiradthuri tribes a small bullroarer, called *moonibear*,² is used in addition to the larger one. It has a short string, which is fastened to the thin end of a pliable stick resembling the handle of a whip. It has a shrill sound which is easily distinguishable from the loud humming of the larger instrument. The noise made by the *moonibear* is said to represent the voice of Dhurramoolan's wife.

To use the bullroarer, a beginner should attach to it a cord or string about 3 feet long, which he should catch in one hand, and swing the instrument with tolerable velocity round and round his head. The air will soon cause it to revolve rapidly on its own axis, in addition to the swinging motion, when it will begin to make a weird humming or roaring sound.

¹ "Journ. Anthropol. Inst.," xxv, p. 298, Plate XXVI, Fig. 38.

² See my paper on "The Burbung of the Wiradthuri Tribes," "Journ. Anthropol. Inst.," xxv, p. 298, Plate XXVI, Fig. 39.



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The spinning of the instrument on its axis in one direction will obviously twist the string, which after a time recoils, and causes the spinning to take place in the contrary direction, thus unwinding the former twisting, and continuing till it is twisted the other way as far as it will go, when it again commences to unwind, and once more changes the direction of the revolution of the instrument on its axis. This is repeated continually during the performance. At each of these turning points, between the twisting and untwisting of the string, the sound momentarily ceases which causes the intermittent humming noise familiar to those who have heard the instrument in use. Variation in the intensity of the sound can also be made by swinging the instrument more rapidly at one point of its circuit than at others. The learner can keep on increasing the length of the string until he can use the bull-roarer with 8 or 10 feet of cord attached to it. If the instrument does not commence to revolve on its axis after having been swung round the head a few times, allowing it to lightly strike the ground will have this effect, and the humming sound will at once begin.

In using the *moonibear* it is only necessary to take hold of the handle, with the instrument hanging freely on the end of its string, and whirl it round as if it were a whip. As soon as the instrument begins to revolve on its axis, it will give out a shrill, whizzing sound, which can be heard for a considerable distance at night when everything is still.

Explanation of Plate VI.

The Australian bullroarers illustrated in this Plate are from the most representative collection with which I am acquainted. The figures are drawn simply as diagrams, showing the shape and outline of the several instruments, without any shading to produce perspective. It is thought that accurate drawings of the various instruments will enable the student to more thoroughly understand the copious written details of description. Those who wish to become more fully acquainted with all the uses to which the bullroarer is applied by the Australian tribes can contain all the necessary information by a perusal of the several papers on Initiation Ceremonies referred to in the opening paragraph of this article, and elsewhere throughout the paper.

Figs. 1, 2, 3, and 4. These drawings show the two sides and cross-sections of a bullroarer used by the aborigines of the Oscar Ranges, Kimberley district of West Australia, courteously lent to me by Mr. W. W. Froggatt in order that I might make a copy. The length of the instrument is $22\frac{1}{8}$ inches; its breadth at the widest place $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches and its thickness $\frac{1}{16}$ of an inch. There is a hole in one end for the string used in swinging it. One side is convex and the other flat,¹ a peculiarity

¹ Several bullroarers which I have seen from the Kimberley district were flat on one side, which was more or less elaborately carved into rectangles, ovals, and various patterns by means of straight or zigzag lines, both with the grain of the wood and across it; the other side was slightly rounded, and had no carvings upon it.

I have before observed in bullroarers from West Australia. Fig. 1 represents the drawings on the convex face; Fig. 2, those on the flat face; Figs. 3 and 4 being cross sections at the widest part. I was unable to ascertain the name of the wood out of which it is made.

Figs. 5 and 6. The bullroarer here shown was given to me by a Kamilaroi tribe on the Weir river, Queensland, and was used in mustering the tribes to attend a Bora at Tallwood, at which I was present.¹ It is nearly $11\frac{1}{2}$ inches long, $2\frac{1}{8}$ inches wide, and $\frac{1}{8}$ of an inch thick. It is made of *mulga* wood, and has six notches on each edge, not quite opposite each other, with a hole in one end for the insertion of the string. The instruments used at the Bora ring in the principal parts of the ceremonies were much larger than this one, being about 18 or 20 inches long, and made of *belar* wood.²

Fig. 7. This drawing represents the bullroarers used by the Wiradthuri tribes on the Macquarie, Bogan, and other rivers. It was given to me by the headman of a tribe on the former river, and was used in the Burbung ceremonies of his tribe.³ It is made of *brigalow* wood, and is nearly $13\frac{3}{4}$ inches long, $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide, and $\frac{1}{16}$ of an inch thick. A cross section through the widest part would be similar to Fig. 6, but correspondingly larger. A string is fastened over the small knob at the tapering end, in the same way that a whip is fastened to its handle.

Fig. 8 is the small bullroarer or *moonibear* used by the same tribes as Fig. 7. It is made of sandal-wood, its length being $5\frac{1}{2}\frac{1}{8}$ inches; its breadth $\frac{3}{8}$ of an inch; and its greatest thickness $\frac{1}{16}$ of an inch. The string and handle attached thereto, when given to me by the natives, were of the following measurements: The handle, made of *mungal* wood, 2 feet 7 inches long, and the string attached to it 2 feet 8 inches in length. The *moonibear* is sounded at the Burbung ground during the continuance of the ceremonies of initiation.

The form of the bullroarer shown in Figs. 7 and 8, representing the large and small kind, with the manner in which the string is attached to them, are in use over a large area, extending from the Macquarie to the Culgoa rivers, and probably farther north. Among the tribes on the Culgoa, the larger instrument is called *wuddoolnurran*, and the smaller, *ghidjookumbul*, and both are used in exactly the same way as the *mudthegea* and *moonibear* herein described.

Fig. 9. This drawing represents the *goonandhakeea* of the tribes scattered over the country between the Hunter and Macleay rivers in New South Wales. It is used at the Keeparra and Dhalgai ceremonies in the manner described in my paper on the "Keeparra Ceremony of Initiation."⁴ The instrument illustrated is made of iron bark, and is $15\frac{1}{2}$ inches in length, and $3\frac{1}{16}$ inches broad. It is $\frac{1}{16}$ of an inch through the thickest part, a cross section of which is given in Fig. 10. There is a hole at the narrow end of the instrument for the insertion of the string.

Fig. 11 shows the *mooroonga* of the tribes occupying the Shoalhaven river and south-east coast of New South Wales, and is used at their initiation ceremonies in the way described in my paper on the Bunan.⁵ The drawing shows a *mooroonga* made of stringy bark wood, 13 inches long, $2\frac{7}{16}$ inches wide, and $\frac{1}{16}$ of an inch thick. In the smaller end is

¹ "The Bora of the Kamilaroi Tribes," "Proc. Roy. Soc., Victoria," ix (N.S.), 137-173.

² A small bullroarer, called *mooniburribean*, similar in shape to Fig. 5, but plain at the edges, is also used at the Bora ceremonies.

³ "Journ. Anthropol. Inst.," xxv, 315: *Loc. cit.*, 319.

⁴ "Journ. Anthropol. Inst.," xxvi, 320, 338.

⁵ "American Anthropologist," Wash., x.

a hole for the string, and at the wide end there is a large triangular-shaped notch cut out of the wood, a peculiarity I have also observed in the bullroarers (*mudjeegang*), used by the Wiradthuri tribes located on the upper Murrumbidgee river.

Fig. 12 represents the *dhooanbooka* or *yoolundry*, the bull-roarer in use among the Clarence and Richmond river tribes, and adjacent districts. Its length is 1 foot $11\frac{1}{2}$ inches, the breadth slightly over $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches, and its greatest thickness about $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch. Its form differs from any of the others shown on the plate, by having a nick cut in the small end for the purpose of facilitating the attachment of the string. One side of the instrument is of the usual convex form, whilst the opposite side is slightly hollowed or concave, as illustrated by a cross-section through the widest part of the instrument (Fig. 15). On the concave side is a shallow hole or pit about $\frac{1}{8}$ of an inch deep, above which are several transverse lines, extending almost the width of the instrument. Along the median axis of the convex face of the bullroarer are about half-a-dozen V-shaped devices, with the apices pointing towards the larger end, and on each side of these marks are one or more rows of dots. As the large and small bullroarers used by the tribes mentioned are both marked in a similar manner, the carving on the convex side of the *dhalguñgun* is shown in Fig. 13, in order to save giving duplicate drawings of each instrument.

Fig. 13 is a drawing of the *dhalguñgun*, or small bullroarer, equivalent to the *moonibear* (Fig. 8), and is used by the same tribes as Fig. 12. The instrument illustrated is 5 inches in length, nearly an inch in breadth, and $\frac{3}{16}$ of an inch in thickness, and is made of myrtle wood. The handle and string attached to it when in use are somewhat shorter than those attached to Fig. 8. It is likewise rounded on one side, and slightly hollowed on the other as in Fig. 15, and has the same characters carved upon it as the larger instrument.

In some of the bullroarers which have a nick or notch in the end to which the string is attached (as in Figs. 12, 13), there are also a few small projections, somewhat resembling the teeth of a saw, on both edges of the instrument, about on a level with the hole, or slightly in advance of it. When the string or sinew is passed through the hole, it is also twisted round the bullroarer, and the raised teeth referred to prevent its slipping, and make the fastening more secure.

Fig. 14. This drawing shows the *gheewarra* or *ngaranya*, the small bullroarer used at the initiation ceremonies of the tribes occupying the Macleay and Bellingier rivers, on the north-east coast of New South Wales. The length is $4\frac{1}{8}$ inches, the breadth $1\frac{1}{8}$ of an inch, and its thickness $\frac{1}{8}$ of an inch. It is attached to a handle and has a short string, and is used in precisely the same manner as the *moonibear*.¹ These tribes also use a larger instrument called *yeemboomul*, which is similar in all respects to Fig. 9 already described, and therefore a separate illustration of it is not necessary.

It is unnecessary to add that there is no fixed size for either the large or small kinds of bullroarers among any of the tribes. The larger the instrument the louder the sound, provided it be properly made, but at the same time it is harder to swing it,

¹ "Journ. Anthropol. Inst.," xxv, 298, Plate XXVI, Fig. 39.

and the wear upon the string is increased by the greater weight. Generally speaking, a bullroarer from 1 foot to 18 inches in length is found sufficiently large for all purposes. Bullroarers of the *moonibear* type are made just heavy enough to give them the necessary impetus through the air.

Among the native tribes near Townsville, and other parts of the eastern coast of Queensland, I have seen bullroarers made of a thin flat piece of wood resembling a parallelogram in shape, with the corners slightly rounded off. Another peculiarity of these instruments was that the end containing the hole through which the string was inserted was slightly wider and heavier than the other end. They were about 1 foot long and 2 inches wide, of the usual thickness, and were bevelled off towards the edges, which were blunt like those illustrated in this paper. The strings were generally made of human hair.