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A religious ritual among the Walbiri people of Central Australia

BY D. ATTENBOROUGH

[Plate 26]

The Australian aborigines hold regular ceremonies in which they mime incidents from the creation myths. These are acts of worship and celebration for those who participate. They also may be the means of acquainting newly initiated boys with episodes of the myths which are kept secret from children as they are from men of other totemic groups and all women.

About a dozen old men gathered in a remote place in the bush. Most had removed the tattered European clothes that they habitually wore at the settlement a mile or so away, from which they had come. Their only garment now was a small pubic tassel. One man produced a bull-roarer, an elliptical piece of wood, 6 inches long, engraved with lines and circles, with a long string attached to one end. He tied the other end of the string to a small stick. Holding it like a whip, he suddenly swung it around his head at great speed so that the bull-roarer produced a loud throbbing note. The noise could be heard a quarter of a mile away. It was a warning to anyone who might be wandering in the neighbourhood that something secret was about to take place, for should anyone who was not so entitled witness the ceremony, even accidentally, he would be punished. In the past this might result in a beating, or worse. Today it usually is resolved by a fine of flour or tobacco.

An old man squatted passively on the ground while two helpers tied around his head a mushroom-shaped hat of dried grass, binding it in place with yards of string made from twisted human hair. He was to represent the snake-god. Another of the elders sitting apart, bound his own arm with a tourniquet of string, clenched his fist, nicked his bulging vein with a small piece of metal, and collected the blood in a rusty can held between his thighs.

Another man took the blood and daubed it over the dancer's body. Then he produced several tins of white and brown cottony seeds of desert grasses. Using the blood as glue, he decorated the dancer with the seeds. As he worked, the dancer shook his shoulders and twitched as though shudders were running through his body. After an hour his costume was complete. His back was covered by a swirling totemic design, red-brown on a field of white. His face was an amorphous mask, the seeds overhanging his eyes and concealing his mouth, like moss (figure 1, plate 26).

The rest of the men now squatted beside the dancer. A few youths stood outside the main group, watching the proceedings. The men began to chant. The snake man shuffled forward on his knees. At the end of each verse, he shook his shoulders so that some of the seeds that covered him fell to the ground. In just such a way, the ancestral snake, moving across the featureless land during the Creation, had shaken off magic particles, *guruwari*, which had given life to the creatures of the desert.

After 5 minutes, the dancer had travelled 6 or 7 yards. Then one of the elders stepped forward, and pressed him on the shoulders. Immediately the dancer stood up. His head-

dress was dismantled, each man reclaiming the hair string he had contributed. The seeds were carefully removed from his body and stored in tins for future use. Then everyone, gossiping and laughing, walked back to the settlement.



FIGURE 1. The snake dancer, Walbiri Tribe, Australia.

(Facing p. 500)



FIGURE 1. The snake dancer, Walbiri Tribe, Australia.