

## THE BULL-ROARER IN HISTORY AND IN ANTIQUITY

by

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In his article, 'Musical Instrumentation among the San (Bushmen) of the Central Kalahari<sup>1</sup>', Dr. G. T. Nurse mentions the bull-roarer and hints at its use other than as a child's toy. In this connection the following brief notes on its usage and significance may be of interest.

In 1884 Andrew Lang<sup>2</sup> wrote, "To study the bull-roarer is to take a lesson in folklore" and he followed this up by stating, "The bull-roarer has been, and is a sacred and magical instrument in many and widely separated lands. It is found, always as a sacred instrument, employed in religious mysteries, in New Mexico, in Australia, in New Zealand, in ancient Greece, and in Africa . . ."

According to Haddon<sup>3</sup> the bull-roarer is "perhaps the most ancient, widely spread, and sacred religious symbol in the world"; and Marett<sup>4</sup> believed that no student of the history of religion could afford "to remain a stranger to it". Haddon considered that the instrument could have been independently invented in different parts of the world and at different times. "On the other hand," he says, "it is usually regarded as very sacred and as being either a god itself, as representing a god, or as having been taught to men by a god. Where this is the case there is every reason to believe that its use is very ancient."

Among the Arunta of central Australia the bull-roarer, or *churinga*, is associated with the 'idea of the spirit part of some great ancestor' who lived in the remote past (the Alcheringa). There are different kinds of *churinga* of which *churinga nanja* is the one 'especially associated with each man and woman, and is supposed to have belonged to and to have been carried about by the spirit whose reincarnation he or she is'<sup>5</sup>.

In Europe it is possible that the bull-roarer goes back to Magdalenian times<sup>6</sup>, ca. 15,000 — 10,000 B.C., or even to the Gravettian<sup>7</sup>, ca. 25,000 — 15,000 B.C. In the first case the supposition is based on the recovery of bone-, ivory- and sometimes stone-pendants, exactly imitating the blade of the instrument, from deposits of Magdalenian age in France. One from Saint Marcel, Indre, (Fig. 1)<sup>8</sup> has serrated edges and an engraved design of lines and concentric circles, recalling some of the designs shown by Australian *churinga*. In the second case, similar objects have been found in Pin Hole cave in

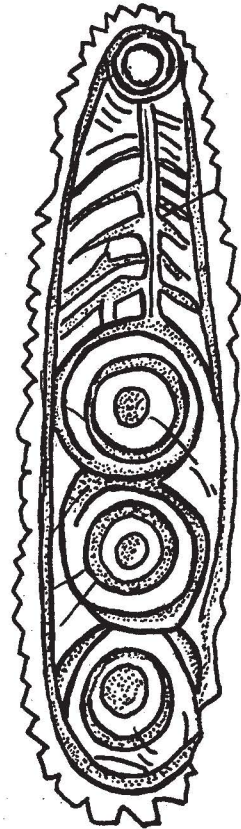


Fig. 1  
Magdalenian  
bull-roarer pendant  
(twice natural size).

<sup>1</sup>NURSE, G. T., in *African Music*, Vol. V, no. 2, p. 23-27 (1972).

<sup>2</sup>LANG, A., *Custom and Myth* (1884).

<sup>3</sup>HADDON, A. C., *The Study of Man* (1896).

<sup>4</sup>MARETT, R. R., *The Threshold of Religion* (1914), (first published in 1909).

<sup>5</sup>SPENCER, B. and GILLEN, F. J., *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1969), (first published in 1899).

<sup>6</sup>SOLLAS, W. J., *Ancient Hunters and their Modern Representatives* (1915) (2nd ed.) and other authorities.

<sup>7</sup>JAMES, E. O., *Prehistoric Religion. A Study in Prehistoric Archaeology* (1957).

Derbyshire, England. These were associated with Mousterian-type implements which survived into the Gravettian at the beginning of the Upper Palaeolithic period. The wooden prototypes which these pendants suggest have not, of course, been preserved.

Haddon<sup>9</sup> thought that the bull-roarer in Africa may have originated with the Bushmen and "other of the African pygmy folk"; Theal<sup>10</sup> describes it (as the *nodivu*) in detail in his notes on the Story of Sikulume, and Friedrich Ratzel<sup>11</sup> refers to it as a "Bushman's rain charm".

Haddon's reference to the origin of the bull-roarer in Africa, and Ratzel's reference to it as a Bushman rain charm, suggest two possible sources — perhaps not widely known — for further enquiry or study: the first concerns (a) the appearance of the instrument in the Brandberg rock paintings of South West Africa, and the second (b) its use by the Ambo — also of South West Africa — when they want (or wanted, as the case may be) rain. The Ambo, it will be remembered, were in former times closely associated with the Bushmen (or San, as they are now more correctly known), and on this account one may wonder whether the idea of the bull-roarer was borrowed by the one from the other, or whether it arose independently amongst both people before they came into contact with one another. In this connection I have elsewhere<sup>12</sup> suggested other possible Ambo/San influences with reference to rock paintings.

In the case of (a), the instrument is, or was, clearly visible in a frieze above and to the right-hand side of the 'White Lady' painting. It is carried in the hand of a white-painted, running figure called by the late Abbé Henri Breuil the "Baboon-man"<sup>13</sup> (see cover illustration) on account of the tail and baboon snout, which the Abbé considered were the latest of certain additions made to the original human figure. Another painting showing the bull-roarer, also found by Breuil, is on a boulder distant from the 'White Lady' painting. "It is carried," says Breuil<sup>14</sup>, "by one of three men walking in single file, each one wearing a helmet crowned by an enormous ostrich plume." A ceremonial use of the instrument in both paintings is suggested by the 'dressed-up' nature of the figures associated with it. It is interesting to note in respect of the 'Baboon-man' Stow's reference<sup>15</sup> to the '*t'Gorlo'ka*, the *Man-nia* or Baboon dance' among the southern San in which the participants dressed themselves to represent that animal. And there is also the 'white monkey game' (the '*goarab-/hurub*'), described by Fourie<sup>16</sup>, played by the Hei//om women of the Etosha Pan area.

In the case of (b) my information is taken from C. H. L. Hahn<sup>17</sup>, who describes a Ukualuthi ceremony, the *omatbila*, in which the bull-roarer and the idea of 'giant' birds flying over the country are involved. The *omatbila* is in fact "an indication of the closing of the old season and the beginning of the new". Every year four or five old men, known as the *ekanjo*, are appointed by the Chief to keep the custom alive. At a prescribed time early in the morning they "march in an easterly direction . . . to greet the rising sun, each carrying an instrument made in the shape of a whip with a flat piece of wood some six inches long by two broad, attached to the end of a lash. As they pass among the kraals they whirl the instrument above their heads, thus creating a sharp whirring sound to represent the noise made by the wings of the huge flying birds". (Though he does not name it, Hahn here gives a complete description of the bull-roarer.) The

<sup>9</sup>From GRAZIOSI, P., *Palaeolithic Art* (1960). (This specimen has been figured in the works of several other authors. It was originally drawn by the Abbé Breuil.)

<sup>10</sup>HADDON, A. C., *The Study of Man* (1896).

<sup>11</sup>THEAL, G. McCALL, *Kaffir Folk-lore* (1882).

<sup>12</sup>RATZEL, F., *Volkerkunde* (1885-88). English translation, *History of Mankind*, (1896-98).

<sup>13</sup>HARDING, J. R., *Interpreting the 'White Lady' rock painting of South West Africa: some considerations*. S.A. Archaeol. Bull., 13 (90) (1968).

<sup>14</sup>BREUIL, H., *The White Lady of the Brandberg* (1955).

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>STOW, G. W., *The Native Races of South Africa* (1905).

<sup>17</sup>FOURIE, L., The Bushmen of South West Africa, in *The Native Tribes of South West Africa* (1928).

<sup>18</sup>HAHN, C. H. L., The Ovambo, in *The Native Tribes of South West Africa* (1928).

ceremony proceeds for four days and after that interval stock is slaughtered and offered as a sacrifice to the "*omathila* or spirit of the birds". (The association of large birds and the coming of rain is interesting and invites further enquiry — as I write this I think of the large soapstone birds of Zimbabwe!) After the sacrifice there is a short feast and then all cattle belonging to the Chief are brought in. This is a sign that the new season has commenced and that preparations for the new crops should go forward. After rains have fallen and the crops are well established, the *ekanja* again go out amongst the people. This time each of them carries "a long stick to the end of which is attached a bunch of ostrich feathers". Their appearance now "causes great rejoicing" among the workers who, calling out "rain, rain", apply their hoes with renewed vigour.

Loeb<sup>18</sup> gives an account of the use of the bull-roarer and of bird masks in the circumcision ceremony as it was formerly practised by the Kuanyama, one of the most important tribes of the Ambo. In a footnote he says, "The bull-roarers are called *edila*, or birds, as are the masked men whose voices they are supposed to represent. The word *odila* (singular of *edila*) also means eagle, duck, epilepsy, and an airplane". He refers in the same footnote to Hahn's description of the bull-roarer as a rain-making instrument (see above), among the Ukualuthi and the Ondonga.

On the opposite side of the Continent the bull-roarer is well known to the Kikuyu of Kenya, but nowadays only as a child's plaything. In former times it was used in their initiation ceremonies<sup>19</sup>.

Only one of the authors quoted in this article mentions the bull-roarer in relation to 'music'. This is Marett<sup>20</sup> who, after saying that even a child could obtain its 'windy note' by whirling it on his forefinger adds, "Naturally, however, it is the privilege of the expert to command the full range of its music". However, the sounds emitted by the instrument, as described by Marett, are surely anything but musical. He speaks of a male bull-roarer that 'growls', a female bull-roarer that 'shrieks', of one that gives a 'buzzing noise', another that gives rise to a 'penetrating, yelping sound', and the 'roaring and screeching din' and 'grand finale of discordant sounds' created by a number of bull-roarers used together. Such sounds would appear to be ideal for the purpose of the operating bull-roarer in former times, when, *inter alia*, it was required to inspire awe, to suggest the supernatural, to scare and to terrify. The use of the instrument for the purpose of extracting music would therefore seem to be a late development, no doubt arising from the displacement or loss of old beliefs, old superstitions and customs and their attendant magico-religious ceremonies.

<sup>18</sup>LOEB, E. M., *In Feudal Africa*, International Journal of American Linguistics, 28 (3) (1962).

<sup>19</sup>HOBLEY, C. W., *Bantu Beliefs and Magic* (1922).

<sup>20</sup>MARETT, C. C., *The Threshold of Religion* (1914).