

# Aboriginal Tongue Piercing

by Erica Skadsen  
erica@organicjewelry.com



I'd like to try to imbue some of the wonder I felt when I first came across this jewel of information. Ethnographers tend to glaze over the more unusual facets

of culture appearing in the people they study, with only a paragraph at most to describe body modification practices—though they often feature prominently in a people's heritage. I spend many, many hours researching these tidbits, and compiling them for myself and *I Am Not My Body* (my little zine of extreme body modification and the medical culture) in little folders or upon my bookshelves. Rarely do I discover practices that are so surprising as what I discovered in *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*.<sup>1</sup> This account, written in 1899, is truly astounding. While the aborigines are known for their use of long septum bones, knocking out of front teeth, and extreme subincision, the fact that certain members of the Arunta and Ilpirra tribes are documented to actually have crystal implants and permanent holes in their tongues, as opposed to ritual temporary tongue piercing or bleeding, struck me at the time of my discovery of the text, equally as now, as being intense and wondrous.

Amongst the Arunta and Ilpirra tribes, medicine men are initiated either by Iruntarinia (ancestral spirits from Alcheringa, the dreamtime), Oruncha (mischievous spirits), or by other medicine men. The book mentions that women may also become medicine "men" though it is much more rare. The following account takes place near Alice Springs in a specific cave called Okalparra:

"When any man feels that he is capable of becoming one, he ventures away from the camp quite alone until he comes to the mouth of the cave. Here, with considerable trepidation, he lies down to sleep, not venturing to go inside, or else he would, instead of becoming endowed with magic power, be spirited away forever. At break of day, one of the Iruntarinia comes to the mouth of the cave, and, finding the man asleep,

throws at him an invisible lance which pierces the neck from behind, passes through the tongue, making therein a large hole, and then comes out through the mouth. The tongue remains throughout life perforated in the centre with a hole large enough to admit the little finger; and when all is over, this hole is the only visible and outward sign of the treatment of the Iruntarinia."<sup>2</sup> He is further subjected to another lance horizontally through his head, death, dismemberment and replacement of his organs, a return to life, temporary insanity, and finally recognition of his new state.

"According to etiquette he must not practise his profession for about a year, and if during this time of probation the hole in his tongue closes up, as it sometimes does, then he will consider that his virtues as a medicine man have departed, and he will not practise at all."<sup>3</sup>

This does not appear to be an isolated type of initiation. Over and over accounts are cited wherein the initiate is killed, often with some sort of stick passing through the body, has his organs replaced, magic stones are put into his body, and he is brought back to the living in anew.

"Next came a huge figure to him, having in its hand a gunnai or yam stick. The figure drove this into the boy's head, pulled it out through his back, and in the hole thus made placed a 'Gubberah,' or sacred stone, with the help of which much of the boy's magic in the future was to be worked."<sup>4</sup>

One thing that is difficult to imagine without thorough study is the belief systems that these tribes held—not only surrounding this particular initiation—but their views on reality.

For example, when one speaks of removing all of the internal organs and replacing them with new ones, is this merely a metaphor for the destruction, death, and rebirth episode that is a common facet in the making of shamen? Does the initiate actually feel this process taking place? Do they go through physical trials that replicate these actions on the surface? Or, indeed, have their organs been removed and replaced? To the initiate, it may very well be a metaphor that is enacted through ritual. But please suspend your own belief for a time and imagine that the initiate may have the firm conviction, through sensation and memory of the actual experience, through ritual, through the teachings of mythology, through the words and actions of those

acting upon him or her, that their organs were actually replaced. At this point is it irrelevant what we may actually believe, what judgment we place upon this. To them, this action actually occurred. And so it did.

“During the sacred Dreamtime, the material limitations and physical restrictions of ordinary people do not exist. The novice, during initiation returns to his primordial state by contacting the spirits of his ancestors. During this ceremonial time he thus gets a taste of the sacred nature of being, of timeless age, accessible to anyone who knows how to open himself to it.”<sup>5</sup>

As much as one may struggle over the nature of the reality of the events presented in the text-yet it exists: the account is fortunately accompanied by a photo. It is old and it was not taken close up enough to determine precisely if anything is being worn through the piercing. However, despite credit being given to a supernatural installation, indeed it appears to have manifested itself in a physical hole being created.

Another account is given of a young man being initiated by elder medicine men (Nung-gara), who subject him to abrasions, implants, and imbibing of crystals. The use of magic and sacred stones that these men hide about or within their body occurs in many of the aboriginal tribes, being called Atnongara (in the North near Alice Springs), Gubberah (Euahlayi tribe), and here, Ultunda:

“On the third day the scoring and eating and drinking were repeated, and he was told to stand up with his hands behind his head and to put his tongue out. One of the Nung-gara then withdrew from his skull just behind his ear (that is he told the novice that he kept it there) a thin and sharp Ultunda, and, taking up some dust from the ground, dried the man’s tongue with it, and then, pulling it out as far as possible, he made with the stone an incision about half an inch in length. The newly made medicine man was then told that he must remain at the Urganja, that is the men’s camp, and maintain a strict silence until the wound in his tongue had healed.”<sup>6</sup>

No mention is made of what, if anything, is used to keep the hole open in the tongue. Knowing their proclivity to using crystals, this might be a strong contender, however, they are also fond of using various bones for their septum piercings, and sometimes sticks of wood, so these materials cannot be ruled out.

Is this the only true example of permanent tribal tongue piercing? Please, prove me wrong! I hope that these articles can incite more readers to search out more examples of the rich heritage of ethnic body adornment practices, so that we can all feel the power and depth that these practices command.

<sup>1</sup> Spencer, Baldwin and Gillen, F.J. *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*. London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1899. Reprinted by New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1968

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Page 523.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Page 525.

<sup>4</sup> Parker, K. Langloh. *The Euahlayi Tribe: A Study of Aboriginal Life in Australia*. London: Archibald Constable & Co., 1905. Chapter IV.

<sup>5</sup> Kalweit, Holger. *Dreamtime and Inner Space*. Boston and London: Shambhala, 1988. Page 102.

<sup>6</sup> Spencer and Gillen. Page 528–9.

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