

# The Scene

## Fiji's Fire-Defiers

By Jack Goldfarb

**C**aptain James Cook, that intrepid explorer who set foot everywhere else in the Pacific, never came near Fiji, calling it, "The Cannibal Islands"

Formed millions of years ago by fire erupting from massive underwater volcanoes, Fiji's fire mystique now manifests itself in strange ceremonies of firewalking. The most well-known firewalkers are from the Sawau tribe of the little isle of Beqa off the southern coast of Viti Levu, Fiji's main island. Originating in the mountain village of Navakaisese, these Sawau tribesmen were said to have been granted their special powers of firewalking by the Spirit of God, according to an ancient legend first related by a Sawau storyteller named Dredre. That the Sawau tribesmen can and do walk barefooted over sizzling hot stones and emerge unscathed is no mere legend.

The firewalking ceremony, long a feature of entertainment for visiting VIPs — although HRH Elizabeth II declined to witness a performance — is now staged regularly at several hotels near Nadi, on Viti Levu's "tourist coast."

Ten tons of wood are piled 13 feet high in a round pit 15 feet across. It is lined with special river rocks, each about a foot in diameter. The fire is lit in mid afternoon and the huge flames burn intensely for six to eight hours. By that time the stones are white-hot and the Sawau firewalkers prepare themselves.

For the previous two weeks they have had to completely segregate themselves from their women and to abstain from eating coconuts. Sawau men have been selected from various Beqa villages to form a group of 22 to 24, led by a *bete* (high priest), whose influence as he directs his tribesmen's emotions becomes paramount in the dramatic rite.

**T**he men adorn themselves in banana leaves and fasten garlands of dry tree fern leaves above their ankles. As the time draws near and

tension mounts, younger men in the group, using long green poles with loops of vines attached, clear the burning embers from the rocks. Sparks fly, while the men chant in unison *O-vulo-vulo* ("We shall overcome obstacles"). A sturdy tree fern, the *waqa-bala-bala*, said to house the Spirit God, is stretched across the pit at the *bete's* orders. A strong vine is dragged across the stones to level them, and now the *bete* self-assuredly steps forward. Gingerly, he jumps onto the rocks to test them for stability. He calls for bundles of leaves and sheaves of swamp grass to be laid around the edge of the pit. This done, the *bete* gives instructions for the root of the *waqa-bala-bala* to point in a direction from which the firewalkers will approach. The young men who have readied the pit form a circle with an opening for the firewalkers to pass through.

All is hushed as the high priest pauses for a last look around. With a loud cry of *Vu-to-o!* ("God keep us cool!") the *bete* commands his tribesmen to follow him into the pit. Trotting forward in single file, the men ranging from teenagers to octogenarians, tread briskly onto the super-

heated stones. Shouting encouragement to each other, they run a full circle inside the pit, then step outside for a few moments while bundles of leaves and grass are tossed onto the stones. Amid hissing clouds of steam the firewalkers return to the pit and huddle on the rocks in the center. A robust chant keeps their spirits high.

Incredibly, a handkerchief thrown onto the stones bursts into flames while the anklets of dry tree fern worn by the men do not catch fire.

Perspiring heavily and smiling faintly, the Sawau men soon emerge from the pit, their ordeal over. The audience invariably crowds in on them to scrutinize their feet. Except for soot marks, there are no signs of burns or even blisters. The drained performers good-naturedly exhibit their soles to the battery of tourist cameras and offer them to the probing fingers of skeptics. Disbelievers chuck bits of paper into the pit, which ignite immediately.

**T**he Indian community of Fiji, comprising half of its population, has its own special firewalking event once a year during a religious festival at the



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time of the August full moon.

The firewalkers prepare for the climactic scene with ten days of seclusion in the Hindu temple, during which time they eat very sparingly and spend much time in prayer. Pious believers, they have given solemn vows to undertake walking through fire in gratitude for urgent prayers having been answered. Some of the more grateful have for many years sworn to firewalk annually. Others do it as a form of penance.

Dressed in yellow robes and wreathed in marigolds, the devotees take in the preliminary rituals. A coconut is broken open. Its three parts symbolize the weaknesses of man. The outer covering (*karma*) represents material attachments, the fibre (*maya*), delusion, and the hard shell (*anavam*), egotism. With the discarding of the three, the pure soul, symbolized by the sweet coconut meat and milk, is set free. In another ritual, camphor lamps are lit to signify divine light. After a purifying wash in the sea, the devotees, most of them with lips, cheeks, or bodies pierced with metal skewers, march in a procession to the edge of the fire pit in a crescendo of drum-

beats.

One by one they leap into the nine-inch deep embers, swiftly, nimbly striding through them. While thousands of emotionally-charged spectators watch and shriek, the firewalkers wade in and out of the pit five times. Obviously dazed by their experience and by the collective fervor of the crowd, the Hindu believers finally exit from the smoldering embers without a trace of burns or blistering.

The philosophy behind the ceremony is that firewalking demands a high level of discipline, as does life itself. The Indian Hindu community derives a sense of confidence and security in knowing that it has such holy believers in its midst.

**M**ost audacious of all the fire-defiers are the people of Yanuca, the tiny island neighbor of Beqa. These feisty folk — and that includes their women and children too — are known as "fire sitters". They have no prior abstentions from sex or food, or any other restrictions. During their firewalking performances they raise the scorching rocks, and squat down on what must be the hottest seat known

to man.

Relative newcomers to fire defying, the Yanucans are said to have wanted the skill so badly a few years ago that they dug a pit, heated the stones, and, while the fire roared, assembled in their local Methodist church and prayed for the power. A high priest was chosen and the congregation faithfully followed him into the pit. When they had achieved their triumph, the Yanucans cried for joy and held a thanksgiving service in the church. "So long as we continue to pray," they declare, "we shall have the power." While other firewalkers have been injured on occasion, no Yanucan has ever suffered burns.

Many firewalking viewers have sought to explain the phenomenon. A team of British doctors some years ago did some studious research and reported that the soles of the firewalkers were no tougher than any other person's accustomed to walking barefoot throughout their lives. They also found no traces of drugs or any locally applied anaesthetizing substances. Tests conducted immediately after the firewalking showed normal reflex actions to lighted cigarettes and pin points applied to the walkers' feet. The doctors differed in their conclusions, however. Some thought imperviousness to flame was all a matter of practice, others argued it was a response to auto-suggestion.

A prestigious Council for Psychical Investigation appointed by the University of London decided that skill in firewalking could be attributed to brief contact with the embers, insulation of the soles by a thin film of moisture, and robust confidence.

But one New Zealand doctor who has attended numerous firewalking performances asserts there is no explanation. "By all logic," he argues, "these people should suffer serious injury!" Indeed, one American Peace Corpsman who recently gave it a try ended up with serious burns.

Most observers are generally agreed that there is no trickery involved in this extraordinary feat. Since it has been reliably established that firewalking is performed without the use of drugs or hypnosis, there remains only the explanation that it is always achieved through a zealously focused belief in the firewalkers' own special gift and in the power that bestows that gift upon them.

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