

THE SNAKE WOMAN, JININGBIRNA

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(Plate ix; Text-figures 1-11.)

This site was recorded in 1948, when I visited Groote Eylandt as a member of the Australian and American Arnhem Land Expedition, sponsored by the Commonwealth Government of Australia and the National Geographic Society of America.

THE MYTH.

In the Aropoia or Dreamtime the mythical snake-woman, Jiningbirna with her four children, came up out of a waterhole, Jininga-madja, on McComb's Point, which separates Hemple and Thompson's bays in Port Langdon. Whilst there, a mythical man, Nanatjua, and his companions tried to capture the woman, but she fled northwards along the beach, taking her children with her. When she reached a lake called Narago-madja, which is behind the sand-dunes in the middle of Hemple Bay, she found that two of her four children had been lost during the flight. Jiningbirna, not liking the water in this lake, shifted to a pink-quartzite headland further to the north, named after her. Here she tried to camp, but the rock was too hard wherever she started, and she had to dig out many boulders which she threw in heaps on the ground.

In some of the arrangements are narrow path-like strips flanked with stones which represent the pathway she followed along the headland. When she continued her flight she went down the northern side of the headland, forming heaps Nos. 7 and 8 in the same way, until she reached the water's edge, which she followed to the beach of the next bay. She continued along this beach for half a mile, then over the dunes to a large natural depression in the sand, about 180 feet in diameter and 12 feet deep, and almost circular in form, called Aitira. The latter is situated on the western side of a sandy flat with a large shallow billabong to the west and stringybark forest elsewhere. At Aitira, Jiningbirna met Nanatjua, who had walked from Jininga-madja, and agreed to be his wife.

Nanatjua, Jiningbirna and the two children, lived for some time at Aitira, and when they died their bodies were transformed into two flat stones (Pl. ix, fig. 6) in which their spirits still dwell. The burnt stump of a slender curved tree 4 feet high is standing a few feet in front of these stones. Under it is buried in the sand another slab of stone. At certain periods of the year, two members of the Jiningbirna totem will dig up one of the stone slabs. When they do, many snakes, led by a huge red-headed one, come out of the hole. But the two men stroke the head of the leader and talk to him, and after a while he goes back into the hole, taking all the other snakes with him. As soon as this happens, the two men replace the stone, and cover it with sand.

This large red-headed snake, whose specific name was not collected, is dangerous to strangers and will eat them if he can catch them. They are safe, however, if, when they see him coming, they climb a tree. This mythical snake sometimes goes up into the sky. He has several of the attributes of the Rainbow-serpent. It is not known whether the site is connected with rain or other magic, whether it is an increase-centre for snakes and lizards, or whether it is simply a place mentioned in the above legend.