



A BRIEF CULTURAL HISTORY OF FIREWALKING

Firewalking, while often associated with Polynesian culture, is a global practice with the earliest records dating to 1200 B.C. in India. Many groups have used the practice as a religious rite, including Eastern Orthodox Christians in Greece and Bulgaria¹, Chinese cultures, and of course, Polynesians. Across these different groups, firewalking has taken several forms. The most common practice is to walk over a layer of embers spread throughout a shallow trench. In other areas, red-hot stones are used instead of embers.²

In most practices, firewalking is used as a rite of passage, as a test of an individual's strength, courage, and faith. In other instances, firewalking is a central feature of religious celebrations, such as the Hindu Thimithi festival.³ Often, the practice was meant to demonstrate the supernatural capabilities of the walkers and their ability to place mind over matter due to divine abilities and strength.

Firewalking first came to global recognition in the 19th and early 20th centuries as European explorers and travelers increasingly interacted with Polynesian cultures.⁴ Tribes and societies practicing firewalking throughout the Pacific were documented in scientific journals between 1893 and 1953, including pictures, chants, proposed explanations, and occasional first-hand experiences.⁵ Western fascination with the practice spread; firewalking quickly became a tourist attraction and by the second half of the 20th century was a staple feature of many Polynesian cultural celebrations.

Today, while still a central part of many cultural and religious practices, firewalking has found a home in many personal and professional seminars for the same reasons as its traditional practice – firewalking tests mental and physical fortitude and pushes the walker to trust their own abilities.

¹ "Ethnography, Historiography, and the Making of History in the Tradition of the Anastenaria," Dimitris Xygalatas, March 2011

² "Fire walking," Encyclopedia Britannica

³ "Thimithi," Wikipedia

⁴ "An Account of the Fiji Fire-walking Ceremony, or Vilavilairevo, with a Probable Explanation of the Mystery," Robert Fulton, 1902

⁵ "Firewalkers of the South Seas," Wilmon Menard, May 1953