

## Wish-Bone or "M" ring by John Booth

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To me, the most interesting new symbol of the magician to come along in the past fifty years is the wishbone ring. It is still not too widespread in the United States and I don't happen to have seen it in other countries. Indeed, I introduced it into Soviet Union magic circles in 1965. where it was apparently totally unknown. Among some of the minor interests of my life has been the tracking down of its background ever since that day I first saw the ring glittering on the hand of Nate Leipsig in New York City.

Mr. Leipsig and I were leaning against a counter in Max Holden's magic store on 42nds Street. We were chatting about Nate's specialty, playing cards, in which he was one of the world's true masters. Then I asked him about the wishbone ring that he was wearing and which was a conversation piece wherever he traveled. It was always on his finger.

"I don't know its origin," he told me. "But I believe it comes originally from Africa. Nowadays, in this country, it symbolizes magic and Nate Leipsig, within our fraternity."

In those days, he was the only man I ever saw wearing one. Paul Rosini was the next person whom I can recall with one.

In 1954, I had occasion to travel in Africa for seventeen weeks. I moved north from Cape Town to Casablanca, east to west from Zanzibar to Libreville. My documentary film work took me into innumerable remote tribal areas including the Congo and the Sahara. My eyes watched for signs of the ring on the hands of native peoples. I showed it to travelers, foreign and domestic, missionaries, diplomatic personnel and newspapermen.

"I've never seen such a ring on anyone on this continent," was the universal reaction.

After this experience, I concluded that the ring may not have originated in Africa after all, as Leipsig believed. Its source still lay in mystery. One evening at a banquet of the Nomad Club in Dayton, Ohio, where I was to lecture, a lady sitting opposite me, who had been casting surreptitious glances at my hands, spoke up:

"Your ring intrigues me. I have see it only once before. I hope it won't offend you if I tell you than an African in the equatorial zone was wearing one. But I can't tell you the exact place."

I don't know why she thought it would offend me. On the contrary, I was delighted to have this glimmer of information. More years passed.

The next break came in the studios of radio station WEEI, Boston (Columbia Broadcasting System) where I was the subject of a two-hour interview and telephone quiz program called Conversation Piece. Heywood Vincent and Ralph Morse were the hosts. During a five-minute station break for news reporting, Mr. Morse remarked:

"I have a ring just like yours. But I am curious where you got yours because I thought I was just about the only American owning one."

I advised him that nowadays it has become almost a symbol of the magician. But where did he secure his ring? At last, I seemed to be on the threshold of learning its true origin and secret.



“During World War II I did some highly important government work in Liberia,” he stated. “In return for some favors for a chief out in the hinterlands he made me a gift of this ring. It is not quite as heavy as yours but the shape is identical.”

“You may not know it, but the ring is allegedly worn only by his tribe, the Mandingo. These people are diamond smugglers. To you it is a symbol of magic; to me it symbolizes diamond smuggling.”

This rather tickled my funny bone; a Unitarian minister wearing a ring that might identify him with diamond smugglers. Note that I said identify with, not one who practices that “profession.” I thought that this information closed the book on the ring’s history. But no, a lot more remained to unfold.

I spent a few days in the large Ukrainian city of Kiev, during the summer of 1965. Another piece became fitted into the picture puzzle. Entirely unbidden, A Russian in that city remarked:

“I see that you have been to South India! Your ring tells me.”

“Although I have spent many months in India on two widely separated visits,” I answered, “I have not been to the very south of India. Have you seen a ring like this in south India?”

“Many people wear them,” he replied. “They are usually made of thinner metal and have a small token or jewel embedded in, or dangling by a chain link from one of the points.

The ring was becoming increasingly international in its background, I was learning. But then came one of the most startling comments of all.

After a large, formal wedding in the Unitarian Church of Long Beach, California, in the late 1960’s, the groom approached me. He wondered, as so many people do, where I had secured the ring that he noticed on my fingers as I held the service book during the ceremony. Then he added that a friend of his, a manufacturing jeweler, made them in San Diego and attributed them to China. Many centuries ago, he asserted, this style ring was clamped tightly onto one finger of every human slave. It was designed to leave a reasonably permanent indentation of the ring’s angular design in the very flesh of the wearer. Thus, if the slave ever escaped and succeeded in removing the ever-so-tight slave ring he could, if captured, still be identified as an escaped slave, by the indentation on his finger.

Naturally, ever since learning this I have been zealous not to have the ring become too tight of leave a suspicious indentation on my finger. I have enough troubles already without a mistake in identity being added.

Let us assess all of this information to see where we stand. Did the ring originate in Africa or China? It could have been designed first in any of these areas. A high culture existed in Africa, near or in Liberia, although I do not know what metalworking was associated with it. Such rings could have been designed elsewhere, in a metal handling culture, and have been transported to other points.

China and India are among the earth’s oldest civilizations. Metalworking goes far back. Indeed, I have stretched my arms around a 1600 years old iron pillar near New Delhi, India, made of rustproof metal discovered long before the West developed the process. But I do not have enough evidence to incline me toward one nation rather than the other in the terms of this ring. I do believe that the first artisan to design it was either Chinese or Indian.

Arab traders in their dhows have plunged south over the oceans tracing commercial tracks all around the African continent’s coastlines. For centuries they moved outward from the Middle East, Sinbads from Basra, the Persian Gulf and similar starting points. One can well imagine these roving traders carrying these beautiful rings for valuable barter. Eventually they would encounter the west coast Africans, the diamond

smugglers and others, leaving with them products like these . . . perhaps in exchange for diamonds. One puzzle bothers me. Why has this ring, which enchants all who see it, not spread further in China, Africa and India? Indeed, many people in those very lands have never seen one like it.

Perhaps in China it would be avoided as a symbol of slavery, in Africa as the possession of diamond smugglers, and in India as the characteristic jewelry of one region that another does not copy.

My Kiev friend who associated it with south India said that he had never seen the ring in the U.S.S.R. One evening in the Moscow apartment of the Soviet Union's foremost sleight-of-hand artist, Arutian Akopian, we talked about the ring.

He was charmed by it and had never before seen one. When I explained to him that it was a characteristic ring of some members of the conjuring fraternity in the United States he exclaimed immediately:

“I am going to have one made and wear it!”

Thus it has passed over into the Soviet Union.

It is called a wishbone ring because it looks like two chicken wishbones, signs of good luck, joined at the tips. Others call it an “M ring” or “W ring” (M for magician, W for wizard) because it appears to be in those shapes, depending on how one looks at it.

Unfortunately magicians are losing their monopoly on the ring. Skiers are adopting it with the claim that its shape reminds them of, and symbolizes, a ski run, up and down hill. “So you are a skier,” said a lovely girl in Denver the other day, indicating my ring.