

Australian Aborigines — Dances and Dancing*

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When the term 'traditional' Aboriginal dancing is used, it should mean,

1. dancing (and the singing which accompanies it) that transcends many ordinary concerns (von Sturmer 1987: 63).
2. songs and their accompanying dances, sometimes only 16, 18 or 20 beats long, that were transmitted from Creator Beings, who were in turn tied to particular geographical sites and locations (von Sturmer 1987: 68).
3. dances that demonstrate the presence of spirits (ancestral or 'Dreaming' spirits) connected to the rich stock of mythical narratives of these peoples and to the wider symbolism of their everyday life and beliefs.

In general, it is in the nature of this kind of traditional dance performance to identify and define. Such performances make manifest and affirm spirits which are not otherwise discernible. Whether the dances are found in Arnhem Land (Boorsboom 1978), or among the Pitjantjatjara (Turnstill 1987: 122-124), the Tiwi of Melville and Bathurst Islands (Goodale 1971: 323-329, 300-305), or the peoples of the Kimberleys in West Australia, traditional Aboriginal dances consist of participatory acts that seek to bring dancers, spirits and various 'Dreaming' traditions (see Stanner 1966) into living juxtaposition with one another and into present, manifest being.

From the best evidence we possess (see Wild 1986 for bibliography, and 1988), traditional Aboriginal dances were meant to close space/time gaps between past and present for the groups of people in the particular small 'bands' or societies who owned them.

To approach, embrace, and become part of their land and its animals and plants they had but their wits, their imagination, their will to be masters under the ancestors who had left it all for them. They learned the land, its plants and its animals ... Through dance and ceremony, rituals, mutilations, masks, decorations, and the secrets handed down from their ancestors, they could enter for awhile into the very being of kangaroo, wallaby, emu, turtle, eagle, crow ... As they moved into the thunder, the lightning, the rain, clouds, so these, inevitably, moved into them. No frenzy this, no childish absorption of the world into self (Burridge 1973: 62).

Something was being *said*. They " ... humanized their natural environment" (Berndt 1987: 170). They knew that they were not wallabies, crocodiles, yams, sugarbags, taipan (snake) or brolgas (a crane-like bird). They were Wallaby *Man*, Crocodile *Man*, Taipan *Man*. Often, their dances followed the 'Dreaming' tracks of the Creator Beings in the desert, or recalled the comings and goings of the Kaa'ngkan Brothers — heroic figures who shaped the landscapes of the

* Originally published in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart: Allgemeine Enzyklopädie der Musik*, (Gen. Ed. Ludwig Finscher), Kassel, Germany: Bärenreiter Metzler, 1994.

western Cape York Peninsula. Perhaps they celebrated the symmetry and asymmetry of geometric shapes of the Rainbow Snake, as in Port Keats, Northern Territory. Of 'Dreamings,' Sutton says,

The concept of the Dreaming, the organizing logic of so much of the symbolism of Aboriginal art, is not easily explained partly because it is unlike the foundational concepts of most other religious systems. The dreaming is not an idealized past. The Dreaming, and Dreaming Beings, are not the products of human dreams. In most Aboriginal languages the concept referred to in English as the Dreaming is not referred to by words for dreams or the act of dreaming, even though it may be through dreams that one sometimes gets in touch with the Dreaming. The use of the English word "Dreaming" is more a matter of analogy than of translation (Sutton 1989: 15).

The graphic arts, paintings, sculptures, etc., and the song cycles and singing of Aboriginal Australia are much more accessible to the outsider than are the traditional dances even now. The problems of research and documentation into the dancing are daunting, mainly because of the sacred (thus in this context, secret) nature of most of the ritual complexes and the dances they include.

For example, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [A.I.A.T.S.I.S.] Library in Canberra holds many films which are restricted to any viewers apart from relevant community members and the anthropologist who was privileged to see and to work on them. Many of these films and accompanying written texts are restricted to viewing by men only, since the rituals are "men's business" and are prohibited to women in any case. There is some material of this kind pertaining to "women's business" where opposite sanctions apply (see Bell 1980), but there exists a general structural asymmetry pertaining to "men's business," which predominates in connection with dances, owing mainly to the fact that it is widely held that men "create the society" while women provide the biological, rather than the cultural, basis for the community.

Visitors to Aboriginal Australia today are likely only to see segments, perhaps, of traditional dancing if they are in a community where a funeral or a "house opening" is in progress. They might see fragmented examples of traditional dances which have been "opened;" that is, made accessible to wider Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences by the people who own and/or manage them. Otherwise they will see non-sacred categories of dancing which exist side-by-side with still extant (although to the uninitiated, generally invisible) traditional dances.

"Shake-a-leg," a danced form common to Cape York Peninsula, generally done at "corroborees" is an example. In fact,

On the basis of many citations from printed matter drawn from different periods and from all over Australia, the Australian National Dictionary defines "corroboree" primarily as a noun meaning: An Aboriginal dance ceremony, of which song and rhythmical musical accompaniment are an integral part, may be sacred and ritualized or secular, occasional and informal. Hence loosely, in extended senses, especially with reference to a meeting or assembly, or to festivity generally (Donaldson 1987: 19-20; see also 25-27).

Not only is "shake-a-leg" a danced form of the Cape, it also connotes a specific movement, ubiquitous throughout the Peninsula, performed in many dances.

Aside from the relatively small proportion of dances which are used for corroboree occasions, dancing and singing are not performed primarily for entertainment purposes. In a rapidly changing environment, however, there are new developments occurring within Aboriginal cultural repertoires with regard to interesting styles of performance adapted by Aboriginal people themselves into western theatrical forms of presentation meant for wider audiences.

Up to now, these adaptations have mainly taken the form of "dance festivals," where a number of different peoples congregate and perform their dances in morning, afternoon and evening sessions over two, three or four days.

Earlier in the history of Cape York Dance Festivals *circa* 1972-1975, the guiding principle behind their organization (in the pre-Government participation period) consisted of providing a place and the means whereby Aboriginal peoples could come together in a context controlled by themselves in conditions conducive to the preservation, transmission and strengthening of their heritage among themselves. The early Festivals provided a place where Aboriginal peoples could become acquainted with each other, as it were ... Now, however, the event of a dance festival appears rapidly to be turning into a tourist attraction, with the result that genuine innovation and creation, a contrived "primitive" Aboriginal form of dancing is also emerging (Williams 1991: 7).

The spatial arrangements of the older festivals (a cleared space, a "shade" — temporary structure as shelter from the sun) where songs are sung, myths retold, and objects and decorations prepared, were not dissimilar from those of many traditional ceremonial occasions. Newer festivals show evidence of stronger attempts to align the dancing with commonly understood conceptions of European theatres and performances, including clearly demarcated "beginnings" and a space reserved for an audience who basically has no idea of what is going on. In traditional dancing, the "rules of the game" were entirely different, not only with reference to "role-playing" but in terms of spatial concepts, as we shall soon see.

The dance that will now be explained in detail was only recently "opened," and was one of the subjects of research and documentation during field trips in 1988. It is only one dance from one place in Aboriginal Australia, but it is hoped that a more detailed description of one dance (the *Minha Punka*; the Wallaby Dance) might give a better indication of the richness and depth of Aboriginal danced traditions than superficial comments about many of them.

In the Wanam tradition (Aurukun and Edward River, western Cape York), performances mediate between the peoples' own past and the present — a past which is the source of life and all good things — because life and all good things come from ancestors and culture heroes. In this case, two "Dreaming" figures who provide the Wanam people with their story (history):

The two Kaa'ngken brothers travelled south to the Holroyd River. As they travelled, they sang songs about what they saw and did, and they created dances

which they taught to the people they encountered. At the Holroyd River they stole fish and were pursued from the camp. Still carrying the fish with them they continued southwards to Wallaby Island in the mouth of the Mitchell River. There were too many mosquitoes so they decided to return northwards. Throwing their boomerangs they cleared the coastal plain of trees and left the salt pans which still remain today. Finally, they arrived at *Thaa'kungadha* at the mouth of the Holroyd, where they left the Wanam ceremony for the future generations (Transcribed from verbal account by John von Sturmer, April 1988).

The historical and mythological mandates for the *Punka* (Wallaby) dance are rooted in the story of these two brothers, but the Wanam people do not use the term "Dreaming." They use the English gloss 'story' for something which they might label in English, "old old talk" or "talk from beforetime" (i.e. *kugu kath* or in Wik Mungken, *wik kaath*). The sense of this, briefly, is as follows: the notion of a 'story' equals history in this context, and *awu* means 'story place.' Story places are places where historical events are believed to have occurred which associate certain phenomena (genus; species) in a permanent way with those sites. The term *kam waya* means 'ancestors,' which is defined as 'story' plus the notion of patrilineal descent. The patrilineal ancestors were actual historical beings. The sites are called *awu*, i.e. fish sites, and the 'totems' are called *kam waya*, i.e. agnatic ancestors or antecedents (FFB+ and MMB+) [i.e. father's fathers' brothers and mother's mothers' brothers and their offspring].

With regard to the *Punka* dance, we can think of the beginning of it as a circle of seated people which denotes 'the society,' which is divided into two big camps. There are singers, who have much more spatial mobility in this part of the proceedings; they get up, walk around, etc., but the other participants tend to stay put. The next section of the dance is initiated by and involves abuse and mock-fighting between the two "bosses" of the dance — the two "big men." These actions throw everything into chaos and the fighting also marks the bosses as people of status. All the people now stand up, they mill around and act as if they are in a confused state. After the fight, all the men who are present form two lines. These are the lines of wallabies.

The two lines are organized facing the bosses, who carry spears and are the 'hunters.' The men organize their lines facing the hunters and they take positions low to the ground. Depending on the occasion, the hunters may lead the 'wallabies' around a bit so that the dancers show patterns of movement and gesture pertaining to wallabies. But the hunters will finally turn to face the lines of dancers, because each pair of wallaby dancers then goes through the hunters' legs, as they stand astride, so that a crouched man can pass through his legs underneath his body.

In performing this act, they are to be understood as being consumed. It is relevant to this dance to remember that wallaby meat is also food that is consumed by this people. However, once they are past the hunter's legs, they are transformed; they are people. They stand up. They are no longer crouching low to the ground and hopping about. The 'low/high' spatial distinction indicates an animal (low), human (high) opposition. In this dance, the men are symbolically consumed and then excreted by the hunters with the spears. They are consumed in ordinary life by expending their labour, by giving their

allegiance to the big men. At the same time, without the myth and without the leadership of these men, they would be less than human. They would, in relation to the Kaa'ngken brothers myth, be nothing but rotten fish. In the symbolism of the dance, they would be wallabies.

There are two significant gestures in the 'follow-the-hunters' sequences which take place after the two leaders have engaged in the abuse and fighting which starts the second section of the dance. The crouching, hopping 'wallabies,' 1. scratch themselves (an animal-like gesture), and 2. they make a gesture towards their mouths, which indicates eating (consumption). As people, they eat. One of the things they eat is wallaby meat. As metaphorical 'wallabies,' they are speared (preparation for becoming food), and then they are consumed. The notion of being consumed (which is also to be metaphorically transformed) applies on several levels:

1. actual wallaby meat is eaten by people, transformed into energy and then excreted as waste;
2. symbolic wallabies (the male network of kin) are governed and given their places in society through their relationships with the bosses, the "big men" who consume their energies and use their labour, but here, they are not transformed into waste, their transformation takes them to a higher level of being;
3. the Wanam people themselves are like the fish in the Kaa'ngkan brothers story: that is, in another version of the story, the brothers threw the spoiled, rotten fish into a river, where the fish revived and swam away, meaning that the brothers' story-history is what gives life and meaning to all Wanam men and their society. Without the story, they would be nothing but rotten fish. There is, therefore, a sense in which the Wanam people are themselves consumed and transformed by the brothers and by the myth itself;
4. the Wanam legends are used (i.e. consumed) in dances and rituals, and the people are transformed in the sense that the society is renewed and affirmed once again.

The end of this dance is equally interesting for it involves a wallaby who does not behave like all the rest. The "last wallaby" stands for the biggest "mob" (literally 'bunch,' 'band,' or 'group' of anything) of people whose totemic emblem is *Kugu'uthu* (dead bodies). I was told that there was an actual person who started all of this in the dance, and for many years now, the "last wallaby" is always danced by a man who is of that totemic group, who live inland, in the timber country, away from the coastal dunes.

His dance moves between life and death, but there is a lot in the whole dance which does exactly that too: any transformation involves losing what you were (death) to change into something else (life).

The last wallaby dancer is actually claimed by both of the hunters, but he does not go through their legs as all the rest of the wallabies do. He is not consumed like the others. This means that he (and the clan/totem he

symbolizes) does not pay allegiance to either of the "bosses," although his clan and people live in proximity to them geographically. The last wallaby dances up to each of the hunters, but he always backs off. This action signifies the fact that he doesn't feel bound by the system which keeps all the rest of the dancers in tow. Eventually, he is claimed by both hunters, and at the end, the three of them are very close together and are embraced by everybody. That is, everyone converges on the three figures so that the dance ends in a dense mob of people whose bodies obscure those of the hunters and the last wallaby to anyone who might be looking on.

Many of the dances of the Wanam people have already disappeared, never to be seen again because the people who knew how to dance them and the singers who knew how to sing them are either too old to perform them any more, or they have died. Many Aboriginal elders conceive themselves to be in an embattled position regarding their traditional dances. As far as we know, there are at least two or three positions on matters of preservation of the dances among the holders of the traditions themselves. One "boss" of the *Chivaree* tradition (Weipa South), now deceased, whom I knew, decided to "kill" the dances by not passing them on to his sons or to anyone in his clan(s). He believed that the traditional dances and what they meant "... had no place in this [modern] world." Holders of the Wanam tradition do not feel or think the same way: they would like to see full preservation and documentation done of the traditions which they hold so that future generations have some record of what their predecessors were like. There are a range of opinions between these opposing points of view, as on a spectrum.

It would be wrong to assume that all Australian Aborigines are uniformly oriented towards traditional modes of existence. Current Aboriginal life-styles range from fairly traditionally oriented people in the more remote areas of the Island continent (the Kimberleys and Arnhem-Land), to still-traditionally oriented living on out-stations (Northern Territory), through a working life on pastoral properties (western Queensland), to life in small Australian towns (New South Wales and South Australia), to ghetto or more integrated lives in large urban centres (e.g. Sydney, Brisbane and Canberra). This diversity is reflected in different styles of performing arts, including the dance.

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