

A.P. ELKIN AND THE STUDY OF
ABORIGINAL PERFORMING ARTS

The Australian Aborigines (1938-1979) by Professor A.P. Elkin,¹ was one of the few authoritative works on the subject published before the second world war. In early editions, Elkin clearly stated his intentions in writing the book. It was designed to "help the white man understand the Aborigines", to promote greater justice in the treatment of Aboriginal people, and "to help them to rise culturally" (Preface, 1934). By 1954 the text had grown from 260 to 400 pages, and the above quotes had been replaced. The many additions, deletions and alterations reflected the changes in Australian public attitudes to Aboriginal issues since the book's original publication.

Elkin's writing is of interest because he was one of the very few white Australians who was prepared to speak for the Aboriginal people. His credentials as the only Australian professor of Anthropology between 1933 and 1942 afforded him the opportunity to play

... a leading role in shaping native administration and mission policy. ... It is difficult for us now ... to appreciate how powerful he was. ... He was in close touch with the Commonwealth and various state governments ... (Berndt, 1965:1-18)²

This paper will look briefly at Elkin's background and at some of the constraints and contradictions that shaped much of his writing, and at his notion of the role of the anthropologist. Then we can look beyond his post-Victorian colonialist world-view and ask: what did he contribute to our knowledge of Aboriginal performing arts?

In 1925, aged 34, Elkin made his one trip to England, where he gained a doctorate from London University with a dissertation on "Aboriginal Myth and Ritual". He had been a country parson for most of his adult life, and on his return to Australia was appointed Rector of St. James at Morpeth (in the Hunter Valley, not far from where he was born). The ideals of pastoral community service extended into his activist approach to his role as anthropologist. This is illustrated by his outspoken criticism of the very different style of his predecessor, Professor A.R. Radcliffe-Brown:

He had taken his subject, even applied anthropology, into an ivory tower. He held that his task was to seek and to propound scientific principles, not to advise administrators and missionaries how to apply them (Elkin, 1956:243).³

Elkin's research contribution was basically empirical (Berndt, 1979:85), and he believed work in the field to be crucially important. He spent a year in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, a year in central South Australia and other periods in central Australia, Arnhem Land, New South Wales and Victoria.⁴

It is necessary to look initially at the central contradictions which bedevilled all of Elkin's attempts to produce scientific, objective accounts of Aboriginal religion, ritual and performing arts. Tensions arise firstly from the obvious differences between his own religious experience and that of the people he studied. There can be no doubt he was involved in both at a personal level. Secondly, this involvement, and his commitment to a particular set of spiritual and moral ideals which included a marked interest in the occult and the mysterious aspects of Aboriginal religion, seems at odds with his commitment to the primacy of empirical observable fact in his research.⁵ Thirdly, Elkin's insistence on the importance of field experience encompassed a convention which said that scientific accounts should avoid the personal at all costs. He provides almost no information about informants and manages to keep himself out of his ethnography most of the time. It is when he fails to do this that the text comes to life.

It was Elkin's earnest desire that Aboriginal people should become full citizens in their own country; a policy of assimilation now much disfavoured. It has to be seen as progressive, however, in the light of previous policies, which were basically protectionist in nature and relegated Aboriginal people to a class separate from that of white Australians. There is no doubt Elkin had the best interests of Aboriginal people at heart; his problem was one of style -- inherited from nineteenth century Christian reformist theology and evolutionism -- and language which indicated his own unquestioned perception that he belonged to a morally superior culture. Referring to the effects of contact with white culture on adolescents and a growing tendency to show disrespect for tribal elders, Elkin says:

... foundations which consist partly of a disrespect for, and shame of, one's own culture and people are a sandy and unreliable basis for the building up of a new religion and culture (1979:189).

They, too, must pass through the Old Testament state before attaining to our view of life, but it must be their own old testament of myth and sanction ... (1979:191).

All these contradictions create disjunctions between Elkin's work in the field and his ethnography, something Johannes Fabian describes as a problem for all social scientists who make the mistake of believing distance from the object of study equates with objectivity.⁶ He suggests it is not possible to produce successful ethnography without some awareness of one's own place in events:

Directly or vicariously, anthropological discourse formulates knowledge that is rooted in an author's autobiography (Fabian, 1983:157).

It is interesting to note, as Ronald and Catherine Berndt suggest, that one of the most striking aspects of Elkin's writing is "his comprehension of Aboriginal religion and ritual life" ('cults', as he would have called them), which was "essentially theological and philosophical". He transmuted these things into "a kind of personal relevance. His own work had this same special quality" (Berndt, R. and C., 1979:87).

There are many references to performances associated with 'totemic and heroic cults' throughout the book, which could perhaps be traced to the fashionable interest in Theosophy and occultism in the '20s and '30s. This movement had many supporters among intellectuals in Australia (Drury and Tillett, 1980:12). Elkin used the term 'cult group' (somewhat contemptuously) to describe the circle of admiring students and associates gathered around Radcliffe-Brown at the university (1956:248).

It was Elkin's great personal interest in ritual and religious music (he was a church organist of some note) that inspired him to include two new chapters in the 1954 edition of The Australian Aborigines: "Art and Ritual" and "Music and Dancing". He also adds sections on "women's sacred and secret life", the "mother-goddess cult" and "the food-gatherer's basic concepts: causation, time, space, number, private property". Elkin states clearly in this last addition to the text just how he believed the Aboriginal people will have to change before they can be assimilated into white society; naming their food-gathering and hunting economic system and their very different sense of time (as a 'continuous present') as the major problems. More interesting, perhaps, for the dance researcher is Elkin's reference to the role of ritual performance in a discussion of 'causation':

In Central Arnhem Land, the leaders definitely state that their performance of the Maraian does not of itself cause the species to increase in due season; it only provides the occasion for the 'shades', the 'souls', of the species to

perform Maraian, and so to increase, that is, to make flesh. ... Man's part in ritual is essential, for it is the occasion and indeed the means through which the unseen, the 'Dreaming'⁷ becomes effective in the sphere of space and time, i.e. here and now (1979:234).

In the two chapters "Art and Ritual" and "Music and Dance" (added in 1954), Elkin's narrow perceptions of the meaning of terms such as 'primitive' and 'art' become apparent.⁸ His judgments about artistic merit in painting have only one dimension -- the degree of 'realism'. He sees myth and ritual for the Aranda people of the Hermannsburg district as a barrier "... to more realistic designs .. the snake pattern is the only approach to realism" (p. 281). The one criterion he uses for descriptions of dances is their approximation to a theatrical classical ballet model of performance: "There is no toe-point and little twirling" (p. 297). These simplistic critical comments are merely a reflection of the stifling cultural constraints existing for a man with Elkin's background in Australia at that time. It is important to add that dances and other forms of Aboriginal art are never treated as isolated phenomena. Elkin asserts that

Aboriginal art is first and foremost a ritual activity, correlated with chanting, dancing and acting -- the other components of most rites (1979:278).

For Elkin these things are all signs and sacraments of the dreaming:

... the heritage of art and ritual ... is the ordered arrangement of symbols, symbolic actions, designs and sounds, in an attempt to express in outward forms the 'shade', the inner life and meaning, the permanent element ... (1979:279).

In 1946 a survey of performing arts was conducted in Arnhem Land, and Elkin was impressed by "the richness and vitality" of the singing and dancing of the region. He made recordings and films of corroborees and of "sacred ritual" (1979:285). It seems Elkin did not see corroborees and other ritual performances as 'dancing' -- a category he reserved for those performances which meshed in some way with the category 'ballet'. This raises the important question of whether traditional danced ritual and ceremonial can ever be performed without being changed when an audience is present. If we use Heisenberg's 'uncertainty principle' in physics as an analogy, we might say that the act of observing changes the nature of the event being observed.

At a very practical level, Elkin notes the difficulties of filming dances in poor light conditions. Although "... filled with zest and meaning, (corroborees) almost always occur at night time ...". Dances performed on request during the day-time "... are artificial and forced compared with spontaneous evening dancing" (1979:285). At this point Elkin makes an important observation about the relative ritual significance of dances:

Generally speaking ... greater secrecy attaches to what is done on the secret ritual ground than what is chanted or to the calls (invocations), shouts and gong or 'drum' beats (1979:286).

Elkin may be associating "what is done" here with 'acting' in a dramaturgical sense, rather than with dancing, but he raises an issue recently elaborated by von Sturmer, who has written accounts of dances performed in the Cape York area of northern Queensland:

... the song may have been heard many times before, but it is the power of the dance which is marked out for special attention ... the song invokes the spirit; the dance demonstrates its presence (von Sturmer, 1987:71).

Throughout the text of this book, Elkin uses capitals for the first letter of "Song" and "Songman", in contrast to "dance" and "dancer", indicating that he imposed a rank structure on items we would now treat more equally under the heading of 'Aboriginal performing arts'. He observed the power of the lead singer to make decisions about ritual matters. Von Sturmer suggests that "... access to songs and other ritual items is a route to power" (1987:64).

Elkin makes a connection between the leadership of senior men and performances ... "hereditary cult-headmanship" associated with a "tradition of individual gifts, skill and ownership" (p. 299). While von Sturmer (1987) and Williams (1988) would agree with the second statement, von Sturmer has suggested there is "a direct line of transmission" for knowledge and performance rights but no simple rules for inheritance" (1987:67). John Bern suggests Elkin saw the headman at the apex of territorial groups where his position was defined by ritual seniority. Bern argues that this competence in performance entitles a headman to regulate daily affairs and adjudicate disputes.

The principle ideological representations of the Aboriginal social formation are to be found in the structure of religion ... (Bern, 1979:119).

-- and one might add, in the performance of dances, rituals and

ceremonies. Hiatt (1965) and Meggitt (1966) also take the view that social control is based on "the authority structure of religion" and that it works in a ritual context (Bern, 1979:119).⁹

Elkin tells us that all classes of sacred ceremonies and rituals have structural elements in common. They are:

... persistent in detail in time and space and ... tend to be widely diffused. This applies to ... secret ceremonial chanting, acting and rhythmic dancing ... [C]orroborees which have a sacred or mythological base ... [and] delayed funeral rites ... (1979:301).

The major functional distinctions Elkin makes between categories of songs and dances are: sacred and secret; sacred but not secret, and secular or 'everyday'. Today one might say that there is a sense in which some are diffused (performed by different groups over a wide area), and others are associated with a particular site and would be deemed also sacred.

The most concise account of a dance in this volume is one that appears in a discussion of musical patterns in Arnhem Land:

[This Wadaman corroboree] ... is performed when tribes meet to exchange goods and arrange marriages. The time is four-four; the dancers take three even steps, and pause for the fourth beat. They also shout, sometimes sustaining the shout in a high note, out of which the Songman's glide seems to descend (1979:291).

Other descriptions are more enthusiastic and less useful for the dance researcher. Describing corroboree structure, Elkin asserts that:

... the best ballet dancing in Aboriginal Australia belongs to central Arnhem Land. It is both mimetic and interpretive. The base ... is the Songman's sticks ... [N]ext comes the didgeridoo. ... On top of these is the Song. ... Then come the dancers, with light unceasing movement, running, springing, hopping, gliding and turning. ... Actually all is controlled by the Songman and dance leader (1979:294-298).

Descriptions of initiation ceremonies for novices tell us about the Aboriginal sense of 'place' or 'country'. When local groups gather at an appointed place:

... they are ceremonially welcomed, generally in the public corroboree ground, after which they fix their camps on the

side of the ground in the direction of their own country (1979:203).

This strong sense of orientation is made explicit in Elkin's explanations -- it appears briefly in the text as a result of careful observation and documentation. He does develop an explanation, at least in a philosophical sense, of Aboriginal notions of time -- in the context of the Dreaming. The dream-time is "eternal"; a term he uses to connote "... that ever-present and immutable reality which underlies, and is expressed in, time" (1979:209). Williams suggests that dreaming time has no futurity, only a continuous past and present; being quite different from essentially linear, European concepts of time (1988:7).

In Chapter 9, "The Secret Life of Aborigines", Elkin writes about the kinship categories which are encoded in Aboriginal sign systems or body language;¹⁰ and about the "art of contemplation", or voluntary manipulation of states of consciousness:

... in many tribes, different parts of the body are regarded as indicating specific relations or groups of relations; in such cases, the meditation is guided along prescribed channels ... he prepares himself to receive an intimation ... of what is happening at a distance ... (1979:241).

Reflecting the cultural values of both the country parson and the dominant Australian male chauvinism of his time, religious music had a place in Elkin's world view, while dances did not. Miriam Dixson suggests that "... a reverence for muscle-over-mind, which masked envy and manifested hostility towards the intellect ..." emerged from the formative decades of European settlement in Australia (Dixson, 1976:71). Elkin's attitudes were not so inflexible on the matter of Aboriginal policy. In the Epilogue to the last revised edition of his book, in 1979, he wrote that he had moved from "assimilation" to "integration", which he believed allowed for Aboriginal people to "... seek to retain their identity and cultural characteristics in a plural society".

In conclusion, this investigation of The Australian Aborigines has attempted to show that Elkin's often impressive and valuable data, selected from extensive and dedicated experience in the field, has been pushed to the back of the shelf because of its language and its author's unreflexive world view. Elkin did not see anthropology "... as an activity which is part of what it studies" (Fabian, 1983:157), despite his active intervention in policy-making to secure the future of the Aboriginal people.

Elkin contributes most to our knowledge. He understood the relationships between Aboriginal art and ritual and was clearly fascinated by the elaborate secret life and the Dream-time of the Aborigines. For example, in one report Elkin reveals an understanding of the experiences he had regarding Aboriginal concepts of time, which are "... a long way from white settlement":

In those rituals we were 'in the dreaming'. We were not just commemorating or re-enacting the past. Whatever happened in the mythic past was happening now ... " (1979:210).

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NOTES

1. The Chair of Anthropology was established at Sydney University in 1925, while Elkin was in England, and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown was appointed in 1926. Radcliffe-Brown was frustrated by lack of funds and left after five years to take up a position as Professor of Anthropology at Chicago University. Elkin remained in the Chair until 1949, and as editor of Oceania until 1956 (Berndt, 1956:101).
2. Sir Paul Hasluck, former Governor-General and Minister for Territories for twelve years, from 1949, continued to work with Elkin after his retirement from the University. He writes:

Academically ... it is only a slight exaggeration to say that in the 1930's anthropology was Professor Elkin and Elkin was anthropology. His book ... was the first general study which had an immediate appeal to the intelligent layman (1988:12).
3. This difference between Elkin and Radcliffe-Brown extended to many issues, despite the fact that there was little contact between them. It was essentially about a difference in style -- Elkin, the colonial with a mission, and Radcliffe-Brown, the Oxford-trained scholar -- urbane, charming, and a skilled lecturer. This view is personal and based on remarks by those who remember them both.
4. Elkin's field work also took him to the Wabag area of the

4. Elkin's field work also took him to the Wabag area of the New Guinea Highlands (1955-56). He subsequently arranged a training programme for patrol officers operating in New Guinea before independence (Berndt, 1956:101).
5. In the Preface to The Australian Aborigines, Elkin describes his own method:

When I write ... I am not thinking of complex organisation in which these men and women are merely ciphers. I 'see' them behaving ... I am not just concerned with abstract concepts and doctrine, though these are present.

6. Charles Varela discusses "the myth of a value-free anthropology" and the need to be aware of one's own subjectivity:

To be truthful may not be confession, and perhaps should not be, but it is certainly an admission of those beliefs which systematically define the whole enterprise of one's knowing career (1985:61).

7. Elkin reports that the concept 'dream-time' arose out of Spencer and Gillen's use of the Aranda word 'Alcheringa' (Altjiranga) in their book, The Native Tribes of Central Australia (1899) to denote the mythic times of the ancestors of the totemic groups.

To ask a man for his Dreaming, e.g. his Bugari, was to be told his cult-totem, or the title of the great myth and ritual into which he had been admitted (1979:210).

8. Elkin's use of the terms 'primitive' and 'art' are problematic. Williams (1988:8) quotes Keali'inohomoku (1970:90):

There is no such thing as 'primitive dance'. The term is meaningless.

Williams makes a clear distinction between 'traditional' and 'contrived primitive' dance forms. The latter have little or no meaning for the culture which produced them except as marketable items.

Fabian points out that 'primitive', "... being essentially a temporal concept, is a category, not an object, of western thought" (1983:17).

Williams asks whether Australian Aborigines have a category 'art' in their linguistic traditions (1988:7). Many cultures do not; e.g. the Hopi Indians of the American southwest. As Elkin himself points out, all these forms of performance are aspects of the same ritual complex.

9. Bern cites Hiatt and Meggitt and others to clarify a much debated issue concerning Aboriginal leadership. That debate seeks to establish whether the authority of the headman (or Songman) works in a ritual context only or operates in other areas of social life.
10. The apparently unique way Aborigines experience their own bodies suggests they have a taxonomic system for body parts associated with a system of social/kinship signification: e.g. the specific postures of the arms which are adopted by women when their male kin are performing dances (Cape York area, Williams and von Sturmer, 1988).

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