

DO ABORIGINAL DANCES MIMIC ANIMALS?

In this essay I argue that the notion of mimicry in Aboriginal forms of dancing is a misconception resulting from modes of investigation which focus on the formal properties of dance sequences to the exclusion of their cultural meaning. I suggest that misinterpretation is the inevitable outcome of analyses which are undertaken without a developed

... methodology for examining performances in themselves -- and in relation to other performances (both of the same and other sorts), and as engaged in and played out in different social/material conditions (von Sturmer, 1987:74).

Just as there are many socio-linguistic groups in Aboriginal Australia, there are several repertoires of dances and each of these features a great variety of dance forms. In what follows, I focus on traditional dances and omit from discussion dances such as corroboree or "play-about" dancing, the many synthesized Aboriginal-islander dances and disco-dancing.

My aim is to assess the notion of mimicry with reference to the following statement of their purpose:

Traditional Aboriginal dances, from the best evidence we possess, were meant to close space/time gaps between past and present for the groups of people in the society who owned them (Williams, 1988:2).

Performances of traditional dances are meant to be re-enactments of the actions of supernatural beings in the "Dreamtime" -- a timeless space filled somewhat differently according to the conceptual categories of each Aboriginal culture.

The divinities of the Dreamtime are conceived of simultaneously as creators of the phenomenal world and as ancestors of the people. While in the process of creating the natural world, they impregnated various geographical sites with their power and human proximity to any of those sites influenced conception. Believing that they are thus connected with the creators of their world, Aborigines think themselves to be responsible to (and for) what has been created. They believe that the creator/ancestors celebrated their creations in songs and dances and that they instructed human beings to perform them as a necessary affirmation of their acts. Each performance of a traditional dance -- together with the song(s) which accompanies it -- is thus aimed at imparting re-vitalizing energies to the world and the whole performance is

suggestive of the origins of the world, the beginning of space/time.

By performing the dances of the creators, however, dancers do not 'mimic' the creators: their roles and the roles of the ancestors are not interchangeable. Aboriginal cosmologies ascribe to performers the role of keepers of the world because what they are performing in the world is a particular sequence in the order of creation. The creator-beings did not suggest that their roles can be mimicked by human beings. They only passed on information (usually through dreams) about how to celebrate their power(s). The conceptual spaces of the creators thus remain beyond human understanding and the choreography of traditional dances beyond human interference and/or manipulation.

I am convinced that Aboriginal cosmologies preclude the notion of mimicry from the performance of traditional dances because the notion of mimicry would imply an equivalence between performers and creator-beings. It would require the superimposition of two distinct conceptual categories and the opposite of order; yet Allen (1973), together with many other writers on Aboriginal dancing, "when faced with 'brolga', 'buffalo', 'fish' or other totemic dances merely say that the dancers are mimicking the creatures" (Williams, 1987:9). Writers who say this kind of thing are applying the notion of mimicry indiscriminately and they are not properly informed on the ways in which traditional dances and Aboriginal cosmologies inter-relate.

Aristotle's analysis of play-making and play-acting is useful at this point in refuting the notion of superficial mimicry in traditional Aboriginal dances. His analysis is also useful in that it points to what is different between western theatrical performances and performances of traditional Aboriginal dances. According to Fergusson, Aristotle believed that both the playwright and the actor imitate action. However, by 'action' Aristotle meant,

... not physical activity, but "a movement-of-spirit", and by "imitation" he means, not superficial copying, but the representation of the countless forms which the life of the human spirit may take, in the media of the arts ... (Fergusson, 1961:2).

The playwright represents a movement-of-spirit by the following processes: first, by ordering deeds into a story or according to a common purpose; then, by selecting some incidents of the story and arranging them into a plot; third, by allocating specific aspects of the action (or purpose) of the play to characters. Thus, in Aristotle's view, the playwright's 'mimicry' of an action is itself a movement-of-spirit. The playwright's

purpose is to focus on one action among the countless forms which the life of the human spirit may take.

... it is the action of artists when they are focused upon the play, or the song, or the poem, which they are trying to make (Fergusson, 1961:6).

Similarly, the actor's relationship to the playwright's imagined people and situations consists of a movement-of-spirit. The actor's purpose is to 'take the mold' of the character imagined by the playwright and to respond to the situations of the play as they appear to that character (Fergusson, 1961:18). But in order to know the nature of that character, the actor needs to understand how it relates to the action of the play. Thus, the actor's purpose is, also, to order the play according to his or her understanding. The actor does not achieve his or her purpose by superficial mimicry; he or she emphasizes particular aspects of the characters and provides the playwright's movement-of-spirit with life-like dimensions.

The indigenous definers of an Aboriginal tribal tradition are, in some ways, comparable to playwrights. They have the story whose action (or common purpose) is creation. They plot the story by filling it with deeds which account for their specific physical and cultural spaces. They allocate the creation of each aspect of their reality to prototypical characters. But one of the differences between the definers of Aboriginal tribal traditions and playwrights is that western playwrights define their individuality with every play they create. They purposefully represent cultural categories. In contrast, definers of Aboriginal tribal traditions do not conceive of themselves as re-presenting cultural beliefs. They create traditions but in so doing, they dissolve their individuality, for they believe that those traditions preceded them (and that their human individuality is spiritual).

Play writing and the creation of Aboriginal traditions can both be seen as 'movement-of-the-spirit', but focused on different orders: the first is secular, the second, religious. The distinction is important for it contrasts the conceptual spaces of western actors with those of performers of traditional Aboriginal dances. Performers of traditional dances do not aim at 'taking the mold' of the prototypical characters (or creator-beings). They do not conceive of themselves as transcending what they are; they do not set out to discover hypothetical situations, and they do not relate as outsiders (or individuals) to an independent text.

During performance, traditional Aboriginal dancers are meant to re-affirm their connectedness with the creator-beings. By fulfilling their responsibility towards the ancestors, they

revivify their common essence. But the performer of these dances, like the western actor, does not copy any aspects of the story in which he or she takes part, because the social role of a dancer, like the social role of an actor, does not prescribe superficial mimicry.

The analysis of the meanings in traditional Aboriginal dances cannot be accurate if the conceptual spaces within which they take place are not understood. It is essential to know, in this respect, that those dances were not meant to be representational. In Cape York Peninsula,

The wanam dances, for example, turn around a horizontal spatial axis established by the singer, who in a sense is controlling the performance. The dancing thus takes place within a tight circle of dancers which leaves no room for an open "wall" or viewing space (Williams, 1988:7).

If this is understood, a viewer does not expect to be included in the expression of meanings. A western observer should be conscious of the fact that a different mode of investigation is needed. If the space of the dance is not understood, the viewer remains alien to its meanings. It is in such cases that the notion of superficial mimicry thrives. The literature of Aboriginal forms of dancing abounds in statements such as, "Some dances simply mimicked the activities of creatures such as birds, without human characters at all" (Morse, 1968:6, quoted in Williams, 1987:15).

Morse did not understand that when birds and other animals are symbolized in Aboriginal dances, it is not as animals but as social or spiritual ancestors that the symbolic connections are made. She also did not understand that those dancers do not mimic, but are what they dance. Fortunately, there are also authors who point to such aberrations by clarifying that while dancers

... may exhibit some of the features of their eponymous animal species, they dance as men -- or perhaps more accurately, as spirits, or as revealing their own spiritual essence (von Sturmer, in press:2-3).

Anthropologists such as von Sturmer realize that to Aborigines the characterization of animals in dance is symbolic. However, as Evans-Pritchard points out, some anthropologists seem to believe that this symbolic dimension is obvious to 'us' but not to 'them' -- the people concerned:

That the relation between the thing said to be something else and that something else it is said to be is an ideal one is indeed obvious, but anthropological explanations of modes of primitive thought as wide apart as those of Tylor, Max Muller,

and Levy Bruhl, are based on the assumption that though for us the relation is an ideal one primitive people mistake it for a real one ... If my interpretation is correct, Nuer know very well when they say that a crocodile is Spirit that it is only Spirit in the sense that Spirit is represented to some people by that symbol ... (Evans-Pritchard, 1956:141).

Aborigines, like the Nuer, do not mistake ideal, or symbolic, relations for real ones. They know very well that dances are not meant to close time/space gaps between humans and animals.

Traditional Aboriginal dances provide the framework around which performers express their spiritual and social essence. For the event of a traditional dance is contingent upon the fulfillment of specific cultural criteria. Traditional dances are meant to be performed in ceremonial contexts as defined by each Aboriginal culture. Moreover, traditional dances are owned by culturally established groups of people (the notion of 'owning' a dance relates to the belief that traditional dances have the power of ensuring survival). Ownership of a dance is a necessary yet not a sufficient criterion for performance. The social order is further manifest in the rule that the body of the owner/dancer must be decorated for the act of dancing by a non-owner to whom the dancer stands in a specific kinship relationship (Wild, 1987:168).

The divinities did not prescribe superficial mimicry. They envisaged the celebration of their deeds to be enacted by beings in an ontological realm distinct from their own. They thus endowed humans with a degree of freedom or cultural creativity. The aboriginal social order developed criteria for performance which stipulate what counts as dancing in the same way as the divinities. It provided the creators' dances with context-specific dimensions and fulfilled the divinities' expectations.

Analyses of performances can be valid only if the performers' purposes, as defined by their culture, are taken into account. As Fergusson points out, Aristotle did not think that the notion of superficial mimicry applies to the process of play-making and play-acting. Similarly, the notion of superficial mimicry does not apply to traditional Aboriginal dances.

Performers of traditional Aboriginal dances do not 'copy' creator-beings in any case. They celebrate actions already completed in a realm that they do not (and did not) intend to control. Their purpose is to fill the gap between secular and sacred domains of existence while defining or revivifying their essences.

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