

AN AUTHOR'S COMMENTS

The edited version of my writing is an insult to scholarship, bordering on plagiarism. My work was reconstituted into a series of undocumented, sophomoric assertions from an original designed to provide readers (especially serious researchers), with a brief, but adequate picture of what traditional Aboriginal dances in Australia were, and in a few rare cases, still are, like. I attempted to refer to regional differences between various forms of Aboriginal dancing, and I tried to say something about what it is Aboriginal people are doing when they dance.

More important, I wanted to talk about the *sources* of the dances and what these sources are all about because so many people think of Aboriginal dancing as 'childlike', 'simple', 'primitive' and such. Yet what I wrote about these dances that challenged outmoded ideas was ignored. Berndt's and Burridge's remarks, for example, cited precisely *because* they are authoritative statements contradicting received stereotypes, were cut.

Many people lack adequate images about Aboriginal dancing. They possess no ideas about the subject of Aboriginal dancing beyond the fact that Aborigines are popularly classified as "primitives" therefore they do "primitive dancing" (whateverthat is). For some arrogant editor or group of editors to decide that comments *calculated to prevent* the operation of such stereotyping are unnecessary, goes far beyond the bounds of reasonable editorial control.

To have eliminated Sutton's comments on Aboriginal Dreaming is especially regrettable, because Sutton's work challenges a major European, British and American misconception, not only about Aboriginal dances but all Aboriginal art. The misconception is centered in serious misunderstandings of what Aboriginal 'Dreamings' are all about.

I included Keogh's work on Western desert dances not only because these dances are stylistically unique, but because his work leads readers toward different insights into the spiritual content of the dances. Knowing what kinds of stereotypes of "primitive dancing" exist among the majority of largely untutored readers about non-Western dances, my work was calculated to dispel these stereotypes, both because they are dead wrong and because

they are damaging to the development of a more enlightened understanding of Aboriginal people as a whole.

In my judgement, then, not only were the editors of the encyclopedia misguided in their approach to re-writes of the articles, they were morally and socially irresponsible as well. A colleague and friend of JASHM who works at the National Library in Canberra asked, "are the editors of the encyclopedia less interested in knowledge, information and/or wisdom than they are in a "quick fix" public relations job because of funding?"

In my opinion, limited funding is no excuse for this kind of misuse of editorial power. Funding agencies and sources need to know that boundaries exist beyond which editors can not or will not go. Intellectual and scholarly authorities need to inform them that legitimate research and scholarly work cannot be reduced to a shambles at the whim of those who hold the purse-strings. If it is the case that the editorial board, or staff, of a publication doesn't have that kind of boundary, then authors should be told of the risks before they commit themselves.

To put the matter plainly, funding sources should be impressed with the fact that *some things can't be bought*. They should not expect to have a literary product fashioned according to originally agreed specifications unless they are willing to pay for it. That kind of attitude is impossible, of course, in situations where editorial pusillanimity reigns. To my mind, there is no virtue in having a publication at all if its quality is so altered it's no longer recognizable.

Fisher's writing was reduced to a set of declarative sentences, coagulated, like mine, into an intellectually unpalatable lump, from which readers will mainly gather that Aboriginal dancing in Australia is well-subsidized. Readers will understand there are several continuously flourishing companies who regularly tour about the world (not really the truth); and that uncivilized, technologically backward peoples find dancing of great importance in their lives. Statements like these provide an evidential basis for my friend's question about a "P.R. fix".

If the editor(s) of Fisher's article had deliberately set out to support an entrenched set of misbegotten ideas about Aboriginal dancing, he/she (or they) could not have done a better job! Fisher's article in the edited version reads like a tourist brochure listing yearly festivals of exotic dancing that take

place around the island continent. But, perhaps that is the none-too-subtle point of it all.

What seems fairly certain is that scholarly considerations were not the guiding principles behind the production of this encyclopedia, or if they were, something went sadly awry during the process. Authors seem to be an obviously expendable resource. And editing? Well, editing is apparently a simple matter of word-crunching, rationalized in banal, brutalized expressions of expedience: budget-cuts.

We may well ask, what are encyclopedias for? Who uses them and why?

The provincialism the editors display in the rewrites is conspicuous. For example, in Fisher's unedited article, the phrase 'Bran Nue Dae' was translated in a note, showing this phrase to be a pidgin-English version of 'Brand New Day'. People in Australia are used to such pidginizations of English, but is it fair for the editors to think that *all* English-speakers will understand these? Equally, it may be true that, say, the staff of A.I.A.T.S.I.S. [Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Studies] understands concepts of Aboriginal Dreaming, but is it fair for the editors to imagine that people outside that institution, and especially people outside Australia, understand these things?

Australian anthropologists and linguists may be familiar with "areas of overlap" in Aboriginal dancing. They may know about how far Aboriginal people have adapted their dances and movement styles to European modes of theatrical presentation, as Fisher points out, but, do the editors think statements pointing to these features of contemporary Aboriginal dancing so banal, that non-Australian anthropologists and linguists will automatically understand?

Haddon, von Sturmer, Beckett, Burridge, Keogh and other authors whose work I quoted, may be "old stuff" to Australian researchers, but they are virtual unknowns to many in the United States and Great Britain. Especially are these authors not known to undergraduate and graduate students who are likely to gain their first impressions of Aboriginal dancing from an encyclopedia article. This population may have no idea what references are available. They certainly won't get any ideas from the edited version of my article, nor will they know what references Fisher used either.

In my opinion -- and Fisher agrees -- it would have been better to cut the articles entirely, or publish them under the names of those who ultimately wrote them, because Fisher and I certainly didn't.

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