

AUSTRALIA: TRADITIONAL ABORIGINAL DANCES

Traditional dancing and songs in Aboriginal Australia were venerated because they were sources of power and social prestige (Strehlow 1971).¹ It has been said that "...the song invokes the spirit; the dance demonstrates its presence" (von Sturmer 1987:71). Such dancing transcended mundane, everyday life concerns. Traditional ceremonies and rituals, which included both songs and dances, were transmitted to particular groups of people from Creator Beings, best thought of as culture heroes and heroines or as mythical figures tied to particular geographical sites and localities. When the term *traditional* Aboriginal dancing is used, it should mean songs and their accompanying dances (frequently only 12, 16, 18 or 20 beats long) which were transmitted to groups of people from the Creator Beings

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 (honey combs), snake (*taipan*) or *brolgas* (a crane-like bird). They were *Wallaby Man*, *Crocodile Man*, *Taipan Man*. Many misunderstandings have been perpetuated about Aboriginal dancing and the notion of "totems". Regarding the Tiwi, Goodale asserts, "I do not believe that there are "totemic" dances any more than I believe that the songs are significantly totemic. However, as in the songs, we will find a significant number of dances that mark the matrilineal sib of the father of the deceased" (1971: 303).

In all known traditional Aboriginal dancing in Australia, the spatial features, i.e. the directions of ancestral tracks in relation to the land and the Dreamings are crucial to understanding them. Danced and ritual spaces are usually oriented on directional axes, for example, "Travelling Women" dance towards

geographical east at circumcision ceremonies. Participants in *Warlpiri* Fire Ceremonies face north as they follow the track of e.g. "Rock Wallaby Man", or "Owl Man" (see Wild 1988a). Traditional dancing grounds and ritual spaces were organized in terms of the Dreaming tracks. The connection between the culture heroes, the surrounding landscape and specific sites of significant events from the mythical past formed the basis for the identities of Aboriginal peoples.

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).

Traditional dances were meant to close space/time gaps between past and present for those who owned them. Attempts to bring them into alignment with European and American conceptions of dancing is difficult, because of the nature of western forms of dancing and the model(s) of learning and knowing attached to them. Contemporary Aboriginal dancing at yearly Festivals, or the dancing done by Aboriginal dance companies on western stages more nearly conforms to western conceptions of time/space. Danced performances in traditional Aboriginal contexts are less *representations* of events (where dancers assume roles different from their social roles) than they are *revelations* of the participants' collective being-in-the-world; affirmations of their inner identities. "*Nurlu* songs and dances are of recent origin whose composition is attributed to various spirit forms: *balangan* or spirits of the dead, and *ray*, childlike in form, who were traditionally believed to be the cause of a woman's pregnancy" (Keogh 1989:3, citing Coate 1966). Equally,

Maninydyirinydyi is the name of a group of over fifty songs owned by Butcher Joe. The first songs and dances originated from 1933...[he] attributes these early songs and dances to his contact in dream with a *balangan* named *Dyabiya*, the spirit of his mother's

sister, who died sometime before 1933. She was buried at *Garrigarrigabu* on the southern edge of Roebuck Plains.... The earlier songs and dances portray the release of *Dyabiya's* spirit from her body and her journey from the grave through the spirit world (Keogh 1989:3).

These dances from the western desert featured elaborate headgear (*wangararra*) which were either worn or carried by the dancers, and can represent rainbows, pelican's bills, shields or *balangan* spirits of a deceased person, among other things (Keogh 1990). These dance paraphernalia are delicately built from bark, wooden pegs and twisted strands of grass and wool. They can sometimes, as in a rainbow headgear, reach six feet from tip to tip. Apart from their symbolic significance, they are strikingly beautiful artifacts; even more so seen in motion against the elusive dividing line of the apparent infinities of desert and sky.

Traditionally, it is also believed that when someone is in an altered state of consciousness, the individual's spirit may leave the body and undertake "dream-spirit travels" (Tonkinson 1978:109). Travelling thus, the individual may contact characters in the spirit world, *balangan* or *ray* who may perform songs and dances which can then be brought back to the ordinary world. When this happens, the person owns those songs and dances and is the "boss" of them, meaning that he or she has rights over their use and display, and performances cannot be done without his or her permission and participation.

In any one region [the religion's] main tenets and at least some of the details would have been known to all adults, both men and women. However, the sacred power was believed to be latent; its sources had to be tapped or activated. The organization of any process of this kind rests basically on what is sometimes called a division of labour between men and women, and between older and younger people, but is better termed a coordination and division of labour.... The coordination of labour or coordinated participation in religious matters requires separation on an age and sex basis on particular occasions... (Berndt 1988:161).

Throughout Australia, ritual performances mediated between the peoples' own past and the present because life and all good things come from the ancestors and the Creator Beings. Whether the dances are found in Arnhem

Land (Boorsboom 1978), or among the Pitjantjatjara (Tunstall 1987:122-124), the Tiwi of Melville and Bathurst Islands (Goodale 1971:323-329; 300-305 and Grau 1983:32-44), in central Australian women's ceremonies (Ellis, Barwick and Morais 1990), in Cape York (Arnold 1991), or among the peoples of the Kimberleys in West Australia, traditional Aboriginal dances comprise participatory acts which seek to bring dancers, spirits and the various Dreaming traditions into living juxtaposition with one another and into present, manifest being. The dances incorporated extremely diverse, socially mandated relations between living men and the spatial and gestural action signs of the dances, which were meant to signify what Stanner called "the marvels" (1966).

In contrast to the many still-living traditions in the western desert, "Twentieth century initiatory and restricted ceremonies in the southeast have been few and far between" (Donaldson 1987:23). Any real knowledge that we now possess about traditional dancing in southeastern Australia is a result of linguistic and ethnomusicological research undertaken since 1970, notably by Donaldson, and Gummow (1985, 1988). Traditional dancing, unlike the singing, was especially vulnerable to the social changes resulting from colonization because of their elevated and hidden ritualization of the life cycles of men. Women tended to be valued nearly universally in traditional Aboriginal Australia for their functional, rather than their spiritual or personal worth, but in a few areas, mainly in "the center", traditionally orientated "women's business" is carried on (see Bell, 1980). In these cases, members of the opposite sex do not see each others' performances except occasionally, in carefully negotiated and arranged circumstances. In Cape York and in some central Australian rituals, the role of women is chiefly confined to supportive dancing. In Arnhem Land women dance only on occasions when men perform, although here, their steps and patterns, unlike those in Cape York, are distinctive. Tiwi dances and dancing are notable exceptions because there are no categorical distinctions made between men's and women's singing and dancing (Grau 1983).

We do not know very much about children's dancing in traditional contexts, but it is believed that children did participate in adult performances. They participate much more now than they did in the past, because they are seen as the carriers and holders of traditions into the future. They are the keepers of a cultural heritage that will otherwise completely die out. In the past, their participation seemed to be limited to "open", unrestricted ceremonies; to "play-about dancing", as it is called in Cape York. It appears to be true that

in times past, children only began to participate seriously in adult repertoires of dances during and after puberty. For boys, this participation was marked by their initiation ceremonies as a beginning, followed by graded inductions into male ceremonial (i.e. political and spiritual) life. The entry of young girls into women's ceremonial life (where it exists separately) was much less spectacular, and was facilitated by the bearing of children, who are still women's major claims to the achievement of adulthood and status. We are told, however,

The *Pitjantjatjara* Aborigines teach special song series, simplified versions of adult counterparts, to pre-pubescent children; In other Central Australian societies, for example, the *Warlpiri*, *Pintupi* and *Alyawarra*, there appear to be no categories of children's songs or dances that are recognised by adults (Wild 1988a:178).

Today, children are major participants in nearly all danced activities, and they perform at major Festivals, one of which was documented in 1987 at Laura, Northern Queensland (Williams 1991) and on numerous other occasions.

All forms of traditional Aboriginal dancing have always been more vulnerable to social change than their songs and rhythmic accompaniments. Speaking of Cape York, von Sturmer says, "While singing is controlled, dancing can be uncontrolled; singing seeks to regulate; dancing can de-regulate" (1987: 69). In a lengthy analysis, this writer explains the *power* of the dances and how dances are created in Northern Queensland, but the power of dancing (and the powers generated by dancing) is no less in other parts of Australia. He also maintains that,

...a performance virtuosity in ritual contexts will reflect and legitimate supremacy in the political arena" [and that] "...there was always a surplus of songs over dances.... Dance performances, being more infrequent and performed in highly restricted contexts, were a more marked form than song performances" (von Sturmer 1987:73).

There is little doubt that Aboriginal music and dancing throughout Australia has changed over time in varying degrees in different localities. Since very little has been written and recorded about any of it (some of the earliest records are from 1790), not much is known of its history before 1788. It

seems clear that increasingly drastic adaptations to colonial occupation have occurred, including the advent of indigenous syncretic forms of dancing due to the proximity of Torres Strait Island music and dances -- rich, complex and entirely different types of Melanesian music and dancing, which has been a feature of Cape York Peninsula traditional culture for at least two centuries (for reliable early information, see Haddon 1904/1908 and Beckett 1972 and 1987). There was lively exchange of all kinds and on all levels between Aborigines and Islanders resulting especially from trade in pearl shells and the emigration of Islander peoples onto mainland Australia. The processes of amalgamation and creation resulting in new forms of music and dancing emerged from the circumstances in which people found themselves. Among these circumstances, the Christian church often played a large part, so that in many parts of Australia, Christian songs and dances coexist with older dance forms and styles of movement. Hymns and gospel music form a major part of the inventory of danced events in rural and urban Australia. In many cases, there is a deliberate attempt to forge concurrent, contemporary expressions of Aboriginal life into new and relevant expressions of Aboriginality. It is this kind of attempt which motivates and inspires many of the Aboriginal dance companies existing today, notably the *Aboriginal and Islander Dance Theatre* and the *Bangarra* Dance Company, both based in Sydney.

Although certain kinds of things can be said about all traditional Aboriginal dancing, in the interests of accuracy, the generalizations always have to be qualified with reminders about differences, for example:

The bodies of dancers are usually decorated, with specific features varying from region to region. Commonly, patterns of red and yellow ochres, white pipeclay and charcoal are applied on greased torso, arms, legs and face. In some areas, particularly in the central region of the continent, male dancers may be decorated with finely chopped feathers or the fluffy efflorescence of certain plant species, which are coloured by powdering with ochre (or left naturally glistening white) and glued with blood on torso, legs, arms and face in patterns representing the subject of the dance; the decoration often continues upward over a high conical head-dress. Many sorts of head-dresses are worn, mainly by men. They are generally fashioned out of grass and sticks, bound into shape by human-hair string, and covered by coloured fluff in particular designs. Women dancers frequently wear headbands that hold bunches of feathers.

Most dancers carry ritual or ritualised objects, sometimes no more than decorated boomerangs, shields, spears, or fighting or digging sticks; at other times the objects are manufactured specifically for the occasion (Wild 1988a:176).

Although very little research has been done on the subject, traditional dances often incorporate fascinating usages of commonly understood sign languages (Kendon 1988), especially specific gestures designating kin relationships. For example, in Cape York, if one knows the signs for kin and clan relations, one can also know who is dancing together or who is accompanying whom. As sophistication among contemporary investigators increases, we can anticipate understanding deeper stratifications of meaning in these dances, taken from the stock of typical everyday signs used to convey messages based upon complex taxonomies of the body, and ascriptions of meaning to sensations in bodily parts. These are aspects of Australian Aboriginal dancing that are radically different from western conceptions of gesture and embodiment.

There are an astonishing variety of ceremonial contexts in which dancing is found. There are various forms of "cult ceremonies", involving sorcery, magic and the like, some, but not all of which, involve dancing. The major life-cycle rituals nearly always do. While it is true that a large portion of traditional ritual is governed by highly conservative ideologies that locate the sources of the singing and dancing in the spirit world dominated by Dreamings, it cannot be assumed that all ceremonies other than *corroborees* or "play-about" dancing for entertainment are completely restricted to outside viewing. "House-openings", where spirits of deceased persons are encouraged to vacate their former residences and allow the living to get on with their ordinary lives are one example, and some phases of a total complex of mortuary rites nearly always have some segments which are open to everyone. Although much less prevalent now, there were local "increase ceremonies" which served the purpose of maintaining the general fertility and productivity of the country and the flora and fauna found living in it, especially the species which provided food. Since one of the major links between singing, dancing and Aboriginal people consists of the land itself, those who still maintain traditional life-styles have a strong sense of responsibility towards maintaining the natural order of things and contributing to the creative powers of the ancestors and the Creator Beings who govern the country.

Aboriginal music and dance are generally performed on a specially prepared ground either in the living area or some distance away, depending on the context of the occasion. A bough-shade, sometimes one for each sex, is usually erected on the side of, or near, the performance ground.... From a non-Aboriginal viewpoint preparations take much longer than the actual performance, but from an Aboriginal viewpoint they are an integral part of it. Songs belonging to the subject of the performance are sung to summon spirits or spiritual power to ensure the efficacy of the event, and stories are told to explain the meaning of the occasion.... Performances are frequently held at night and fires have to be readied at strategic points on the dance ground. When everything is ready and the musicians are in position on the ground, they signal...the dancers, who may appear dramatically from behind a screen of trees, boughs or smoke. In this final stage of the event the Aboriginal genius for dramatic effect is often revealed in the dance movements, dance formations, the complex web of sounds and the decorations illuminated by the flickering light of the fires... (Wild 1988a:176).

At Dance Festivals, where no longer restricted dances are performed, and which generally last two or three days, these conditions are more or less well-duplicated, depending on local bosses and managers of the dances. When the Festivals are held during the daytime, sunlight minimizes the dramatic effects of night performances. Day or night or both, bough-shades are constructed and participants remind themselves of themes to be enacted by singing relevant songs and discussing myths. Objects like necklaces and head-dresses are prepared and the bodies of the dancers are "painted up". Time is always organised so that everyone has a chance to perform. However, in traditional settings, time was no object: one ceremony could take days, sometimes weeks or months and the customs and protocols of welcome, farewell, gift exchanges and much more were all included as part of the event. In some of the modern Festivals, one misses that sense of timelessness, especially if, besides the dancing, competitive events (boomerang throwing, spear-throwing, fire-lighting) are interspersed.

Today, contemporary Aboriginal life-styles range from fairly traditionally oriented lives 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 working lives on pastoral properties

(western Queensland), to life in small Australian towns (New South Wales and South Australia), to ghetto, or more integrated lives in the large urban centres; Sydney, Brisbane, Perth and Canberra. This diversity is reflected in different styles of all of the performing arts, including dances.

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NOTE:

¹ See Master Bibliography on p. 166 for References Cited.

Dance

Songs and the capacity to dance are venerated as sources of power and social prestige. Such dancing transcends everyday life concerns. Rituals incorporate songs and dances transmitted from Creator Beings who are tied to particular geographical sites and localities. Dances close space/time gaps between past and present for those who own them. Danced performances are less representations of events (where dancers assume roles different from their social roles) than they are revelations of the participant's collective being-in-the-world; affirmations of their inner identities. Knowledge of the directions of ancestral tracks in relation to land and Dreamings are crucial to understanding the dances. Dances and dance grounds are often oriented on directional axes. On the whole, ritual performances mediated between the peoples' own past and the present. Dances comprise participatory acts which seek to bring dancers, spirits and various Dreamings into living juxtaposition with one another and into present, manifest being. Social distinctions are always clearly evident in the use of sets of painted body signs, and specific gestures may designate kinship and/or totemic relations. The dances incorporate mandated relations between living men and actions signs (both spatial and gestural) which signify what have been called 'the marvels'. Current Aboriginal lifestyle diversity is reflected in different styles of performing arts, including dances. Dancing is especially vulnerable to the social changes indicated by this diversity because of the high and secret ritualisation of the life cycles of males, known colloquially as 'men's business'. Members of the opposite sex would not normally see each others' performances except occasionally, in carefully arranged circumstances. In Cape York, Arnhem Land and in some Central Australian rituals, the role of women is chiefly confined to supportive dancing. Tiwi dances and dancing are notable exceptions. In general, dancing is not done primarily for entertainment, but recent adaptations, which take the form of dance festivals, now occur where different peoples congregate and perform their dances in the afternoons and evenings over two or three days. As well as dances intended for public entertainment, there are dances which are done as parts of initiations or other types of ritual, which in some areas have been opened to public viewing and are no longer regarded as secret. At these festivals, staging amounts to a cleared dance space with surrounding (bough) 'shades' -- temporary shelters where performance roles and actions are discussed. Participants remind themselves of themes to be enacted by singing relevant songs and discussing myths; objects such as necklaces and headdresses are prepared and the bodies of the dancers are 'painted up'. Time is organised so that everyone has a chance to perform. [433 words] DW

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