

CONTEMPORARY ABORIGINAL DANCES AND DANCING

Dances and dancing lie at the heart of much Aboriginal ritual life. Consequently, changes affecting ritual are felt with particular force by those wishing to preserve the meaning and significance of traditional performing arts. A growing number of people understand the essential role of these performances as carriers of the identities and unwritten histories of Aboriginal peoples. A smaller number are aware of the religious, revelatory and initiatory nature of knowledge and power which characterises the Aboriginal model of danced events. It follows from this particular model of events that

motivations internal to Aboriginal society still generate vibrant aesthetic productions in many parts of Australia and a variety of artistic traditions...is still very much in evidence. Without firm roots in living cultures Aboriginal arts would cease to exist (Wild 1980).

Issues arising from the effects of European settlement on Aboriginal performance are the subject of ongoing debate. These concern such matters as ownership of dances and songs; the acceptability of preserving or recording secret/sacred material; the scope and significance of women's ritual life and the consequences of exploitation of traditional performances for commercial purposes.

Contemporary Aboriginal dances include several major areas of activity which may overlap in some cases. There are traditional dances, which are presented in what may be their original forms or in adaptations; new (non-traditional) dances and songs created by and for Aboriginal people; Aboriginal dance styles incorporated into European (or other) dance styles; and entirely Europeanised dance forms in which contemporary Aboriginal performers with appropriate training take their places in professional presentations.

Traditional dances are still performed but with decreasing frequency. They include long-established syncretic forms like Torres Strait Island dances. Often referred to by modern performers as *corroborees* these dances can occur in traditional settings or in large scale Dance Festivals where many local groups from a wide area perform their own dances.

Some adaptation and innovation occurs within traditional repertoires: dances can change their status from secret or restricted to open or public status;

new dances and songs are received from spirit ancestors and old dances (no longer performed) are re-invented. As clan groups have settled in larger communities, collective performances have drawn people from a much wider area, although attendance has always been governed to some extent by kinship, language ties and relationships to country.

In the 1960s and 1970s some of these gatherings developed into periodic Dance Festivals, beginning in Cape York, at Laura, Lockhart River and Cairns. In 1972 the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council sponsored the Northwest Inma Festival in northern South Australia, at which many traditional dances were performed specifically for training children in their own traditions. This festival had direct and positive impact on the work of the centre for Aboriginal Studies (Adelaide) which was in its early stages of development.

Festivals are now held in the Northern Territory (e.g. the Barunga Festivals near Katherine, and Groote Island Festivals) and in West Australia (e.g. the Broome Dance Festivals). Initially these were events at which dances, stories and songs were shared and social networks established. Each group had its own dance ground, performed in turn, and also assisted other groups. More recently a competitive element has been introduced and some performances have been adapted to meet the requirements of the tourist and entertainment industries.

Some assistance with travel etc. to these gatherings has been provided by the Aboriginal Performing Arts Unit of the Australia Council and the Aboriginal Cultural Foundation (previously the Aboriginal Theatre Foundation established in Darwin in the late 1960s by Lance Bennett). The Council of Pacific Arts (South Pacific Commission) arranges festivals in the region at regular intervals at which Aboriginal dance groups have been acclaimed performers. The Sixth Festival of Pacific Arts will be held in the Cook Islands in 1992. Previous festivals were held in Fiji (1972); Rotorua, New Zealand (1976); Papua New Guinea (1980); French Polynesia (1985) and Townsville (1988).

Many examples exist of deliberate efforts by Aboriginal men and women to preserve or revive dances in a form as close as possible to the originals. These activities include visits by traditional dancers and musicians from distant parts of Australia to urban schools and dance companies. Attempts to preserve traditional dances also include programs to teach Aboriginal

children in their own communities. Projects of this type were started as early as 1971, and are now being undertaken by a number of groups including the Woomeerah Aboriginal Corporation (Townsville and Mornington Island) and the Bundjalung people from North Coast, New South Wales.

Traditional dances have been adapted for non-Aboriginal audiences to broaden understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal ritual and beliefs and provide some financial independence. As a result, demand for these performances has continued to grow in Australia and internationally. Successful tours by regional groups were conducted from at least as early as 1975 when the Ramingining Dancers from Darwin toured the United States with David Gulpilil. More recently, a number of groups have conducted successful overseas tours, for example, the Noongah Dancers (formerly the Middar Dance Company) from West Australia toured overseas in 1987 and 1991, and Yothu Yindi from Arnhem Land in 1989. The Tjapukai Dance Theatre from North Queensland has toured consistently during recent years: to France in 1989; Europe, Japan and the United States in 1990 and Europe and Korea in 1991.

Many exciting productions by local community-based Aboriginal groups have emerged (e.g. *Bran Nue Dae*¹ from Broome) and continue to appear in 1992 -- notably a Brown's Mart production in Darwin based on a play by Eva Johnson, and in Sydney the 'Harold' Project, a work by Kim Walker based on the life of Harold Blair.

Within an essentially conservative framework, old dances have been adapted and new ones invented to accommodate changing circumstances. Traditional dances have been used, for instance, as a means of substantiating claims to land, and have acquired entirely new religious contents, as in the Christian *Purlapa* ceremony at Yuendumu in the Northern Territory. New dances have emerged like the 'Bombing of Darwin' by Tiwi people and 'Tractor Dance' from Mornington Island. The style and degree of this kind of innovation varies widely between groups.

Around Australia there are a number of schools which teach dancing and draw their inspiration from traditional Aboriginal performance (e.g. the Aboriginal Dance Development Unit in Perth and the Redfern Aboriginal Dance Theatre and Eora Centre in Sydney). The major centre is the National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA)

established in Sydney in 1975 (under the direction of Carol Johnson) which now has an academic program and a performing arts program.

Every year, NAISDA students mount a production around an Aboriginal theme (e.g. 'Kayn Wayu' in 1990 and 'Reflections' in 1991). NAISDA students learn traditional dances and perform them as separate items or include them in their entirety within major dance works. They also use ideas from the themes (mythology and beliefs) underlying traditional performances. Aboriginal movement styles are used in choreography in combination with other modern dance styles (e.g. those of Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, Lester Horton and American Jazz styles).

The Aboriginal and Islander Dance Theatre [AIDT] is associated with NAISDA's performing arts program and is a full-time professional dance company in its own right. Its members responded to the growing demand for Aboriginal performers and travelled widely in Australia and overseas. A second professional company, 'Bangarra Dance Theatre, Australia', evolved from AIDT in 1989 with a policy of involving Aboriginal leaders in reviving interest in traditional dances, particularly among young people. The group has toured in the Pacific region and participated in cultural exchange programs. Their performances were highly acclaimed at the Indonesian Dance Festival in 1991.

Aboriginal dances and danced movements have inspired and been incorporated into works by European choreographers, at least since 1946, when two such productions appeared in Sydney: 'Terra Australis' (Borovansky) and 'Corroboree' (John Antill and Rex Reid). In 1972, Jiri Kylian devised the ballet 'Stamping Ground' (film by SBS TV) for the Netherlands Dance Company after working with dancers on Groote Island. Choreographers Cheryl Stock ('Dance North' in Townsville), Kai Tai Chan and Kim Walker (formerly 'One Extra Company' in Sydney) have attempted to incorporate Aboriginal styles of moving into their productions. The creative activity that occurs within Aboriginal dance communities is a crucial element in the emergence of distinctively Australian dance idioms.

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(1292 words: requested length 1250 words)

[N.B. The edited version of this article appears on the next page.]

NOTE:

¹ Read as 'Brand New Day'

Contemporary Dance

Involves many issues arising from the effects of European settlement on Aboriginal performance, including ownership of dances and songs; the acceptability of preserving or recording secret/sacred material; the scope and significance of women's ritual life; and the consequences of exploitation for commercial purposes. Dances lie at the heart of much ritual life. This means that the difficult nature of changes affecting that ritual life are felt with particular force by those wishing to preserve its meaning and significance. The 1960s and 70s saw the beginning of regular dance festivals, first in Cape York, and then at Laura, Lockhart River and Cairns. NT festivals include the Barunga (near Katherine) and Groote Island Festivals, and WA has the Broome Dance Festival. Some financial assistance for these events comes from the Aboriginal Cultural Foundation. The Council of Pacific Arts (of the South Pacific Commission) arranges regular festivals in the region at which Aboriginal dance groups have been acclaimed performers. Many people have made efforts to revive and preserve dances in a form as close as possible to the original. These activities include visits by dancers and musicians from distant parts of Australia to urban schools and dance companies, and programs to teach dances to Aboriginal children in their own communities. These dances have also been adapted for non-Aboriginal audiences, to broaden understanding and appreciation of ritual and beliefs and to provide financial independence. As a result demand for these performances has continued to grow in Australia and internationally. Successful tours by regional groups were conducted from as early as 1975, when the Ramingining Dancers travelled with David Gulpilil from Darwin and the USA. More recently the former Middar Dance Company from Perth toured in 1987, and again in 1991 when the group reformed as the Noongah Dancers and toured France. Since touring in the USA in 1989, Yothu Yindi have achieved international renown. Many exciting productions by community-based Aboriginal groups have emerged, including 'Bran Nue Dae' from Broome, and these continue to appear. Original forms of dances have been used as a means of substantiating claims to land; some have acquired entirely new religious content, as in the Christian 'Purlapa' ceremony at Yuendumu in the NT. New dances have emerged such as the 'Bombing of Darwin' by Tiwi people and 'Tractor Dance' from Mornington Island. The style and degree of this kind of innovation varies widely between groups. Around Australia there are a number of schools which draw their inspiration from Aboriginal performance, among them the Aboriginal Dance Development Unit in Perth, and Sydney's Redfern Aboriginal dance Theatre and Eora Centre. The major centres of this kind are the National Aboriginal

and Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA), the associated Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre (AIDT) and the Bangarra Dance Theatre, Australia, which evolved from AIDT in 1989. Aboriginal dances and movements have inspired European choreographers at least since 1946 when Borovansky produced 'Terra Australis'. In 1972 Jiri Kilian devised the ballet 'Stamping Ground', and choreographers Cheryl Stock, Kai Tai Chan and Kim Walker have attempted to incorporate Aboriginal styles of movement into their productions. [511 words] GF.

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