



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Australian Aboriginal Heritage, eds. Ronald M. Berndt and E.S. Phillips; published by the Australian Society for Education through the Arts with Ure Smith, Sydney 1973.

Two writers comment on this recent publication - a journalist from Sydney and the assistant editor of this journal.

Olaf Ruhen,
"The Australian"
Sydney*.

If the path to a peaceful and profitable co-existence lies through understanding, as I am certain it must, Aboriginals and their well-wishers - and indeed the nation - should ever be grateful for this production.

Something more than a publication, it consists of a big tri-media package containing the elements for a basic study of this gentle, resourceful and mysterious race, and the motivation of its tribal and individual elements.

The principle behind it lies in the inter-relationships of the arts: painting and sculpture are visual representations of the content of story, dancing and mime its dramatic presentation, music and song a mnemonic device for the same traditions as well as an outlet for communal celebration and a binding of tribal pride. All of them communicate the religious beliefs and the laws, and in combination they make these precepts a sure guide to behaviour, an ever-present authority.

TRANSPARENCIES AND RECORDS

The knowledge which lies at the base of the total culture is closely related to the visible world; the tribal lore concerns things seen and held in close association with the demands of

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living; the individual artist operating in whatever medium has to go directly to that world for his materials: for his paints, his musical instruments, his dance steps.

The arts proclaim and cement his position within that familiar world, not one at a time but with the whole body of the culture. All this describes the man or woman living tribally.

As co-editor Phillips says in an introductory essay :

"An Aboriginal was educated, in the full sense, within his own socio-cultural environment; outside of that he had much to learn. In the compartmentalisation of knowledge in our own society, and the development of specialisation, we are familiar with this situation: we may have knowledge of one field but be hopelessly ignorant in another. And this is especially true as far as the arts are concerned.

In traditional Aboriginal Australia, on the other hand, most persons were educated (in varying degrees) in all the available arts - and those arts were a part of social living."

So here, in a single package, comes an excellent book, profusely illustrated and accompanied by two long-playing records and a selection of transparencies for projection. These are to be used in conjunction so that, for example, one can read Professor Trevor Jones's expository article on the didgeridoo, and then, listening to the record, follow his notes about each presentation. At the same time one can see projected a picture of the instrument, the player, or women with songsticks.

In the same way, listening to Alice Moyle's *Songs by Young Aborigines*, you can follow the musical notation, read the words and hear the production of at least 17 different items.

Several times, in the atmosphere of the camp, I've listened to singers lit by fire-flicker and starlight, and the excitement has pervaded me, but not much understanding. I wish I could go back now and listen with the additional background these sound preceptors have here provided; because the desire for understanding, identification, whatever it is that one's nature searches for, is not to be compared with the ability to exercise it even in the smallest parcels.

Dancer and choreographer Elphine Allen gives very fine descriptions, with diagrams, of certain dances; Dr. Margaret Kartomi sets a standard for the whole book by describing a children's ceremony, so that the reader begins where the Aboriginal himself must begin, at the elementary stages.

I imagine the most obvious outlet for the package is the secondary school, though people of Aboriginal descent separated from a tribal upbringing will treasure it, I know, and because of an inherent international importance deriving from the culture's unique aspects, its sale should contribute also to export figures.

SECRET-SACRED RITUALS

To quote Phillips again,

"The volume emerged assomething more than an educational device. It took the shape, we like to believe, of one aspect of the Australian Aboriginal heritage, looked at from within and without, and in regard to its aesthetic contributions. *This* the Aboriginals have done - and much more. *This* is a glimpse of what they had and have to offer."

Deliberate omissions have been the presentation of the secret-sacred rituals in word and picture, and with one exception, in music; also the domestic or utilitarian crafts such as the making of tools and weapons. A volume concerned with these latter is proposed as a subsequent enterprise.

Academic jargon has been reduced here but it still exists, with horror words such as "compartmentalisation" (quoted above) for "compartmenting"; "wholistic" for "total"; "routinisation" for the making of habit.

And throughout the work the contradiction in terms "oral literature" is a standard reference. An apology is offered for this by one of the writers, but it does not become justification for displacing the good, precise and appropriate word "lore", with its comprehensive inclusion of story, song, myth, the laws, traditional knowledge and religious precepts. "Lore" rather than the difficult concept "oral literature" provides the fabric of the nexus linking song, dance, painting and sculpture.

Perhaps another instance of jargon is the spelling of "jabiru" in three or four - but not all - places with an initial "d". This word is a European introduction adopted from the Tupi people of the Brazilian forests; but the spelling of the "j" sound with the initial "d" or "t" has become standard in Aboriginal studies. Incidentally the jabiru is also described here as a "policeman bird", which it is, and as a "crane" which it is not.

Bill Harney in his inimitable way used to mime the indignant non-comprehension of a woman friend after she was interviewed by an academic researcher not unknown to fame. "That fellow know nothing," she said. "I told him my name was Jane, and he wrote it down d-j-e-n'."

Understanding has come a long way since then, and with goodwill and the boost of this excellent production and, one hopes, its successors, will travel further yet.

The book has been released for schools and institutions. A trade edition will appear in book shops later, and it will be dearer.

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Prospective purchasers of the kit may also find the following information helpful. (For publishing and purchasing details, refer to Vol 2, No. 3 of this Journal). The subject of the kit rests on a framework divided conceptually into six parts. In a socially logical fashion, the reader is introduced to the Aboriginal heritage as young Aboriginal children are, from the beginning. Thus Part 1 is "The Social Beginnings of Art." This is followed by "Story, Myth and Song", "Rock Art", "Sculpture and Bark Painting", "Music and Dance", and finally Part VI, "The Future of the Aboriginal Arts".

Now some physical details. The book is printed on glossy paper and is 11.8" by 8.3" by 1.3" deep. Its three hundred and twenty pages include many photos, maps showing places mentioned

in the text, musical scores, diagrams of dance steps, a very useful list of illustrations and a comprehensive index. The whole package is encased in a 'Coolite' (expanded polystyrene) box and measures 14" by 13.5" by 3" deep.

Further contributors not mentioned by Ruhen include C.P. Mountford, Percy Trezise, Bruce Wright, Catherine Ellis and Catherine Berndt. Some of the more specialized articles have titles such as *A Children's Ceremony at Yalata*; *Wandjina Paintings*; *Aboriginal Rock Art of Cape York Peninsula* and *The Didjeridu in North-eastern Arnhem Land*.

The contribution of Professor Ronald Berndt is particularly worthy of mention - two articles on sculpture in Part IV and the co-authorship (with Phillips) of Part VI. In addition, he wrote the book's Introduction, "The Arts of Life". This, with "The Future of the Aboriginal Arts", constitutes some of the most enlightening comment on 'things Aboriginal' that I have yet read. In the true tradition of the scholar, Berndt is not merely concerned with externals, the activities, of Aboriginal societies. He is more deeply concerned with the reason behind the activities. These reasons may spring from the demands of the physical environment or from the demands of the socio-religious environment already established to explain the why, how and when of human existence. Thus he is able to demonstrate the complex and integrated web of beliefs of traditional Aboriginal societies in a way which adds dignity to the people and to the study of their culture. At the same time, his writing is factual, logical and completely lacking in patronising sentimentality. So what he attributes to other research workers can also be attributed to him. His insightful overview does "much to lift the veil of European ignorance that (hangs) heavily over the cultures of the Aborigines." (1)

Even more importantly, Berndt portrays a vision of a future Australia in which people of Aboriginal descent will make positive and respected contributions to the general field of artistic endeavour. The notoriety will not be that of the present where artifacts which are no longer culturally significant to the particular Aboriginal group are mass produced as novelties for sale to tourists. Their contribution will be that of skilled artists who draw on their Aboriginal (and other) heritage merely as all artists draw on and express through their ethnic backgrounds.

Further to be commended for reading is E.S. Phillips' Foreword which describes the origins, philosophy and production

of the kit; and C.F. Makin's Preface which discusses the educational value and significance of such a work. In their separate fields they are informative and stimulating.

Reference

1. E.S.Phillips & R.M.Berndt, *The Australian Aboriginal Heritage*, Part 6, Looking Toward the Aboriginal Arts," p. 293.