

MUSIC AND DANCING

It was not until I made a survey in 1946, around Arnhem Land that I realized the vitality and richness of the singing and dancing of that region. I then began making permanent recordings.

Sacred chanting

Nothing could be more impressive than the solemn chanting in iambic measures by male voices in unison of parts of the Kunapipi—the mother-goddess cult of the central north. The central Arnhem Land Maraian “hymns” too, are full of poetic expression, which impart the “dreaming” and end with an amen-like ‘e-i’, leave no doubt of their sacred character. Much of the sacred singing is secret—some camp corroboree chants include words of deep, secret significance, understood only by those well up in the secret life.

Musical instruments

The most interesting Aboriginal instrument is the *didgeridu*, but it is only known in Eastern Kimberley and the northern third of the Northern Territory. It is an unstopped, hollow piece of bamboo or wood about 4 feet to 5 feet long and 2 inches or more in internal diameter with a mouthpiece made of wax or hardened gum. The player blows into the instrument in trumpet fashion and the precision and variety of rhythm produced is striking and continuous. Clap-sticks use the gong principle and in the secret Yabuduruwa ceremony of the Roper region a thick length of resonant wood is held shoulder-high, lying across one hand. It is struck with a striker a little more than an inch in diameter; it emits a remarkable gong-like sound which carries about half a mile.

Secular music

In addition to sacred and secret music, the Aborigines possess much secular or “everyday” camp music. It is usually part of the corroboree which is a complex of drum-like noises, singing, dancer’s calls, shouts and so on. Corroboree themes are usually based on everyday experiences and incidents, both recent and traditional. They include the ways of birds and fish and the Aborigines’ experience of and interest in European and other non-native objects such as tobacco, aeroplanes, cards, etc.

Musical patterns

These vary in different regions and within a region according to theme. Examples from the north include the rich north-east Arnhem Land

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tradition which has a most striking rhythm and pleasant melodies. Multi-part music is also a feature. It is mostly based on the style of the canon or fugue for two or three voices. Another example is that of the Wailbri women’s chanting. This is a rise and fall in volume caused by an overlapping of voices on a tile-like system. Just as the chorus becomes low, a number of the singers start afresh, usually on a higher note, while the others are still chanting. This both increases the volume and produces incidental harmony.

The Songman

He is a tribal man who has been taught by his father or uncle how to make new songs and hand on the knowledge of the old ones. No-one can sing them without his consent. Once he starts tapping his sticks, a group gathers. The active men dance and shout, while the women beat time, or dance quietly where they are. The older folk watch and silently beat time, while their thoughts sink into the Dreaming, the unseen world of belief, of faith and of hope.

The Dance

In my experience the best ballet dancing in Aboriginal Australia belongs to central Arnhem Land. The clap-sticks, the didgeridu, the singing and the dancing is controlled by the Songman and the dance leader. Individuals earn big reputations for their dancing and deservedly so. In the various tribes, we see schools of dancing as well as of painting. We think of the graceful, gliding, lithesome, light-stepping mimetic and interpretative