

ABORIGINAL DANCE TOTEMS

The speaker at the meeting of 3 June 1998 was Dr Pat Vinnicombe, a well-known member who is currently an Honorary Research Fellow at the Berndt Museum of Anthropology at the University of WA. As Pat was being introduced by our president Kevin Kenneally, the scene was set by a tape of background music from One Arm Point recorded by Gary Ridge. This was most effective.

Pat used many overhead projections and slides to illustrate and explain the totems, which are basically derived from a string or thread cross with many different modifications. She also brought a circular Bardi totem lent by Mary Macha to show us - it was very colourful with little tufts of down or cotton wool around the edge.

In providing background information on her work on Aboriginal Dance Totems, Pat related that a professor of anthropology from the USA, D. Davidson, published an overview paper on Australian string crosses in 1951, based on field work carried out in the late 1920s and early '30s. This pioneering work included a distribution map which showed that the Nyoongars of the South West of WA did not use string crosses, nor did they extend into the Northern Territory and the Eastern States. They are, however, prevalent in the Kimberley region. String crosses are made in many parts of the world, but it is not known how or when they were introduced to Australia. The Aboriginal people believe that they come from spirits, quite literally, and new dances with associated totems are still being "dreamt" today.

In the Western Desert and adjacent areas where the influence of Desert Law is strong, women and children are restricted from seeing string crosses which are believed to be imbued with great power. Paddy Roe, a respected elder from Broome, advised Pat, for her safety as well as his, to keep away from investigating such totems as they are too dangerous to be tampered with. However, in other areas, the dance totems are openly used in public ceremonies, and Pat showed slides taken in Kununurra picturing young girls carrying small string crosses in their hands. Some totems, on the other hand, are very large, more than twice the height of a human, and are carried on the shoulder by men.

Many of the dances portray journeys made by spirits or have their origin in historical events. For instance, a dance composed at Kalumburu told the story of Cyclone Tracy, and included totems of a very tall rain serpent with a Wanjina like head and a painted board showing a large stone falling from a mountain side. The Rainbow serpent is believed to have caused the catastrophe that demolished Darwin. These totems are now in the Darwin museum.

In Kunmunya, there was a dance telling of the coming of the white man, while the late Wattie Nerdu, a Wororra man from Mowanjurn (Derby), dreamed a dance which

originated from the Wanalirri painted rock shelter. This dance, with its associated painted totems embellished with a surround of twined coloured wool, is now proudly performed by the pupils of the Wanalirri School at Gibb River. The visual images used in the dances all originate in dreams, as does the accompanying music and the dance.

Music and dance used to play a very important role in Aboriginal life, and people travelled considerable distances to perform their dances for other groups, where they taught to a wider audience and indeed traded. Bardi totems from Sunday Island were traded as far as Port Hedland during the heyday of pearling.

Bardi totems are complex in design, and are distinctively different from the more basic string cross designs in other areas of the Kimberley. The Bardi and neighbouring Jawi were a truly seafaring people who built flimsy rafts from light mangrove poles fastened together with wooden skewers. The people lived largely off marine products and had an unparalleled understanding of the intricacies of the treacherous tides, rips, whirlpools and overfalls for which the Buccaneer Archipelago is infamous.

Roy Wiggan, an elder of the Bardi tribe who lived many years on Sunday Island, is disappointed that his people are now prepared to dance only for tourists when a transaction of money is involved. He has therefore decided to make totems for sale, and hopes to promote a greater appreciation and understanding of his culture through this means. Lord McAlpine initially commissioned Roy Wiggan to make totems, known to the Bardi as ilma, for special occasion dances in Broome and Kooljiman at Cape Leveque. Roy turned out hundreds of ilma which were stored in a warehouse in Broome, and through the auspices of Mary Macha, these eventually went to the National Maritime Museum in Sydney. Most of Roy's ilma designs come to him through the spirit of his deceased father, Henry Wiggan, who skippered the Sunday Island Mission lugger. Indeed, there is whole series of dances based on the life and adventures of Henry Wiggan.

During the war, the mission on Sunday Island closed down and the Bardi and Jawi people who had lived there were transferred to the Derby Reserve. Here they subsisted in abject conditions surrounded by mudflats, continually dreaming of a return to their beloved blue-water islands. Anthropologist Michael Robinson worked with these people during this crucial period, and presented a Masters Thesis to UWA.

Billy Ah Choo, one of the refugees from Sunday Island, was working on Camballin Station chasing birds off the rice fields when a series of songs came to him centred around the life of his close friend Henry Wiggan who had died. Billy's son Sammy is continuing with these songs and traditions, and Roy Wiggan, the eldest son of

Henry, regularly has spiritual visits from his father who brings designs for the ilma Roy now creates. Many of these designs revolve around an epic saga when his father was washed out into the Indian Ocean on his raft which broke in half. He survived for three days before miraculously being carried back to Sunday Island by freak tides - and helping spirits. One of the ilma represents the flashing lighthouse at Cape Leveque. Others feature fish, birds, jellyfish, a seaweed that gives protection to pearlshells, a smoke signal, a waterspout, whirlpools and many more.

Another misadventure with a happy ending occurred while Henry Wiggan was skipper of the Mission lugger. The vessel, which was under sail and had no engine, was becalmed and swept away in a fierce tidal rip. After being trapped in a whirlpool, the lugger was dashed against Mid Rock, a jagged outcrop located between East and West Roe Islands. The mast was broken and Henry's shoulder injured, but they nevertheless survived due to his singular power as a medicine man. He was able to conjure up a huge turtle which swam under the lugger and carried it back to the safety of Sunday Island!

This concluded Pat's very interesting talk and we thanked her in the usual way with a round of applause after question time.

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