

AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES, ORAL TRADITIONAL LITERATURE AND ITS DEPICTION IN PERFORMANCE ARTS

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Abstract

This study has been undertaken with the objective of understanding oral traditional literature and the role of performing art forms of Australian aborigines such as songs and dance in it. The study has attempted to trace back to the historical times when this form of expression emerged in Australian history of performing arts, the put pose for which it emerged and the intentions it served, As research methodology, this study has exclusively focused on collection of empirically established information that is available in scholarly sources. The study findings depict that Australian aboriginal songs and dance served ay tools by means of which the cultural heritage, perspectives, traditions and practices of the native population of the yesteryears were conveyed The study further finds out that the next generation of Australian natives was made aware of their cultural heritage by means of these popular forms of performance arts.

Keywords: *Australian Aborigines, Performance Arts, Oral traditional literature etc.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Oral traditional literature is a specific form of literature in which various dimensions of the culture of a community are expressed orally through a storytelling mode (Botha, 1991; Ross, 1986). It is a distinctive aspect of the Australian culture primarily because of the geographical position of the country that affected the lives, cultures and views of the native Australian residents or aborigines who have been living in the continent with minimal contact with the outside world. Hence, historically Australia had a distinctive culture of its own with its unique characteristic features that remained unperturbed by the outside world. However, along with the early contact of the Australian continent with sailors from Spain, Portugal and Netherlands in the 16th Century, this distinctive native culture started deteriorating. With the arrival of the British in the 18th Century, the cultural environment of the aboriginal Australians got totally disrupted. As a consequence, oral tradition of storytelling literature became the most significant tool for the aboriginal Australians from then on for preserving their cultural heritage and passing it on to their next generations. The stories, songs or narratives that formed a part of this form of literature would thus narrate all the information necessary for the survival of indigenous culture. Even the ritual performances that were

accompanied by the traditional songs and dances also formed a part of this oral traditional literature and it depicted stories relating to aspects like the religious world of Australian aboriginals, information regarding the creation of aboriginals world, their beliefs and culture (S6igulinska, 2016). This paper attempts to investigate how Australian aborigines used performance arts for the depiction of oral traditional literature.

2. DISCUSSION

a) History of presence of oral traditional literature in performance arts of Australian aborigines

The history of oral traditional literature in the culture of aboriginal Australians started during the 18th Century onwards when the British sailors inhabited the continent and started deteriorating the indigenous cultural heritage (Ross, 1986). Performance arts became a tool for rebellion towards the late 20th Century that the Australian aboriginals started using from that time onwards with the intention of establishing their rights on their own native land. They struggled to retain the richness of their distinctive cultural identity in an ambience where there was strong western influence on the country (Wu, 2014). Thus, performing arts in the form of song and dance became distinctive ways by means of which this oral tradition of storytelling was narrated by the aboriginal Australians. The interlink between this oral traditional literature and performance arts was so strong in Australia that an individual who had the ingenuity to sing or dance and depict his or her cultural heritage through the act had great respect in the corresponding aboriginal community (Ross, 1986).

Forms and types of performance arts

If aboriginal Australian song is specifically considered in this regard, it can be said that this form of performing art became increasingly important among the native population as a means of mediating opinions and agendas of the Australian national consciousness. These songs served as an artistic platform for the native population of Australia by means of which they could express a concerted resistance to colonial dominance and ill effects of colonial influence over their native culture and sovereignty (Wu, 2014). One of the characteristic features of this specialized form of aboriginal songs was that it was allusive in nature and often very short in length. This feature of aboriginal songs was predominant for both sacred and secular songs. However, when songs were specifically meant to depict any ritual of the Australian aboriginal culture, they would be in the form of verses and the verse would be repeatedly sung by the singers. One of the noteworthy features of the lyrics and language of these songs of storytelling tradition was the language used in these songs that slightly or vastly differed from what the aboriginals used in their everyday life. This difference was achieved by various methods such as making some phonological changes, adding syllables to daily used words, achieving some morphological simplifications and so on. The vocabulary of these songs was also recondite in nature. Besides this, each of the individual keywords used in the songs of oral traditional literature of the Australians featured the characteristics to

reflect multiple senses at the same time (Ross, 1986). The distinctive aspect of these aboriginal Australian songs is that the tune is not the only important feature of this form of performing art, but the culture pays equal attention towards the words present in each of the songs. In nutshell, it can be said that these songs that are vital forms of oral traditional literature are basically ancient and traditional poems that have been intoned as per the old and customary modes. They transcend the theoretical boundaries of poems and can be sung only because words in each of the lines have been designed in metrical form that give them a musical quality. When these art forms comprise of syllables having long vowels, it takes up no more time than chanting in comparison to other songs' that comprise of words with short vowels. However, when the syllables in songs have short vowels, the consonant clusters present then take crucial role in taking up the remaining time value of notes on which the syllables fall. Based on all the features, this category of aboriginal Australian songs are composite forms of art that feature intoned verses, and rhythm. In this case, it needs to be paid attention to that this implementation of strong rhythm in Australian aboriginal song was perhaps deliberately done by the creators for the purpose of making this form of performing art a great match for Australian aboriginal dance. What is even more interesting to note is that the presence of rhythms in these songs were done in well calculated manner so that they can be perfectly conglomerated with different forms of dance that depict different themes connected with the native life of the Australians. Nonetheless, there were some complex features of Australian aboriginal song as well that was meant for conveying the cultural heritage of the native population of the continent. This is related to the musical notation present in these songs. These notations posed challenges to the singers because there was no fixed melody in them if judged from the conventional standpoint. These songs would only connect closely with the tunes that were exclusive of specific Aboriginal tribes of Australia. Thus, in most of the songs there was the presence of invariable rhythmic measure in the first consonant, and the second consonant featured the specific tonal pattern that is accurately traditional in its form (Strehlow, 1955).

c) Salient features and examples

Although substantial work has been done so far on the prominence of song as a form of oral traditional storytelling tool, much work has not been done on traditional aboriginal Australian dance (Ross, 1986). Nevertheless, it has been found out that dance as a performing art existed in Australia for over 40000 years, which is equal to the time when the aboriginals inhabited the continent. Dance had been the corroboree and other ceremonies of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Hence, when this art form was used as a tool of oral storytelling, it depicted the life and culture of the native Australian inhabitants as well as the Torres Strait Islanders (Throsby, 2004). The characteristic features of aboriginal Australian dance form of oral traditional literature were that they have specific mandates for arm, body and foot movement. The dance forms that depicted rituals or were religious in nature were distinctly different from the light hearted dance form that was meant for sheer entertainment

(Aboriginal Art and Culture, 2018). Moreover, through specific movements, expressions and make-ups, the practitioners of these aboriginal Australian dance forms imitated domestic tasks, or depicted native terrestrial and marine creatures that relate to the totems or their native environment (GBRMA, 2018).

d) Modern influence and reception

In the present times, this tradition of aboriginal dance form continues even to this date (GBRMA, 2018). However, further enrichment in this form of aboriginal performing art occurred in Australia during 1960s to 1970s w training schools, training programs and tertiary level native dance courses emerged and spread throughout Australia through acclaimed universities. Native dance form received further encouragement from media, which thereby resulted in further propagation of this form of oral traditional literature through international and local level music theater productions. Thus, at present where dance is a well-developed form of performing art in Australia, Aboriginal dance has its own separate place (Throsby, 2004). The aboriginal dancers and Torres Strait Islander people practising this form of aboriginal dance still use natural environment and natural objects like the manner in which the ancestors did to create the musical ambience for their performance. Moreover, the use of traditional musical instruments like clap sticks, drums and didgeridoos still continue to be used in this form of oral traditional literature (GBRMA, 2018). As far as the effect of modernization on aboriginal Australian song of the 18th Century is concerned, what is available today to the indigenous people of the continent is the interplay of contemporary music and cultural heritage. These songs still stand as live artifacts of social memory and cultural heritage that closely depict the life of native population of the yesteryears. These songs show how indigenous performing art weave memoirs of the past, present and future together, and present them as musical expressions of the theme of 'caring for the country' to today's generation of aboriginal Australian population (Neuenfeldt, 2008).

3. CONCLUSION OF THE STUDY

The topic that has been explored in the present study is the significance of oral tradition of literature in Australia and the significance of song and dance as popular forms of this oral tradition. In so doing, the study has made extensive review of already established empirical works and came to understand that Australian aboriginal song and dance as part of the oral storytelling tradition had its roots during 16th century when the continent was being colonized by Portuguese, Spanish and Netherlanders. Situations became worst during the 18th Century when the British arrived in the continent and led to steady deterioration of the indigenous culture. During this time, this specific form of performing art became a tool of rebellion for the native Australian population by means of which they attempted at denouncing the process of colonization on them and reaping of their cultural heritage. The aboriginals made attempts to preserve the richness of their culture in these forms of performing art and pass on to their next generation so that they can in turn take it as a responsibility to preserve their culture and take pride in it. The study concludes by finding that the influence of modernization has not

changed the style, theme or motives of these aboriginal Austrian songs and dance. But options like training academies, tertiary courses and workshops have made these art forms more professional and polished in nature.

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