



A Private of the Royal Marines (1815) by J.C. Stadler.  
*The National Maritime Museum, London.*

## THE BIRTH AND DEATH OF A CEREMONY \*

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Early European observers, unaware that adult Aborigines were usually fluent in several dialects or languages, often commented on how accurately they repeated English words and phrases at first hearing. Some also reported that Aborigines quickly distinguished differences in character and rank from their shrewd assessment of the peculiarities of European dress and behaviour. So acute was their observation and so skilful their mimicry that Europeans were sometimes disturbed as well as amused. Long before cartoonists ridiculed them, Aboriginal communities across the continent were making fun of European habits in their camp entertainments.

But in Aboriginal society careful observation and accurate imitation also had a more serious role. The 'foreign' languages of other communities had to be learnt to gain access to new knowledge. Song words and the complicated actions of dancers had to be mastered if new rituals were to be adopted.

There is much published evidence that encounters with strangers — Macassans, Torres Strait Islanders and others — have been memorialised in Aboriginal ritual performances. But European society had little spectacular ritual. The religious observances of the early settlers were drab in comparison to Aboriginal ceremonies. Their songs were not accompanied by dancing and there was little elaboration of costume or body decoration. The drill of military units did provide a comparable spectacle, with colourful uniforms and patterned movement directed by shouted orders or music. The early records suggest that Aborigines in many regions showed intense interest in military ceremonial. An all-too-brief account suggesting that the observed military drill might be memorialised in serious ritual performances was found in the letters written by Mrs Daisy Bates to the editor of *The Australasian*, William Hurst.

On 8 December 1801 Captain Matthew Flinders, R.N., brought H.M.S. *Investigator* to anchor in King George Sound, Western Australia. On 12 December the ship entered Princess Royal Harbour, on which the city of Albany now stands. Her captain and crew surveyed the sound, its islands and possible harbours, and collected wood and water. Meanwhile the naturalists studied the plant and marine life.

\* I am indebted to James Urry and Diane Barwick for much assistance in the preparation of this paper, and to the Director and staff of the Royal Marines Museum, Southsea, Hampshire, for documentation and illustrations of the Marines' drill at the period of Flinders' voyage to Australia.

They remained for about three weeks, and during the whole time maintained peaceful and friendly relations with the local Aborigines, with whom they exchanged gifts.

The naturalists measured some of the men, but the women 'were kept out of sight with seeming jealousy': the men appeared to think that Flinders also had women whom he kept hidden on board.<sup>1</sup> Flinders noted that the men looked like the natives of Port Jackson although the words of their language which he collected and wrote down were entirely different from the Port Jackson vocabulary. On 30 December 1801 Flinders<sup>2</sup> recorded his opinion of the day's events:

On the 30th, our wooding, and the watering of the ship were completed, the rigging was refitted, the sails repaired and bent, and the ship unmoored. Our friends, the natives, continued to visit us; and the old man, with several others being at the tents this morning, I ordered the party of marines on shore, to be exercised in their presence. The red coats and white crossed belts were greatly admired, having some resemblance to their own manner of ornamenting themselves; and the drum, but particularly the fife, excited their astonishment; but when they saw these beautiful red-and-white<sup>3</sup> men, with their bright muskets, drawn up in a line, they absolutely screamed with delight; nor were their wild gestures and vociferations to be silenced, but by commencing the exercise, to which they paid the most earnest and silent attention. Several of them moved their hands, involuntarily, according to the motions; and the old man placed himself at the end of the rank, with a short staff in his hand, which he shouldered, presented, grounded, as did the marines their muskets, without, I believe, knowing what he did. Before firing, the Indians were made acquainted with what was going to take place; so that the volleys did not excite much terror.

Four days later the *Investigator* sailed away. Her captain and crew could not have imagined what would be the lasting effect of their visit.

More than a hundred years later, probably in 1908, Daisy Bates met near Albany a very old man named Nebinyan. In 1945 she recorded some of the information she gained from him in a letter to Hurst.<sup>4</sup> She said Nebinyan had told her that the Aborigines of King George Sound

1 Flinders 1814:I.

2 Flinders 1814:I, 60-61.

3 At this period the uniform facings of Marines were white, but when they were granted the title of Royal Marines in 1802 the facings were changed to a blue shade (Director, Royal Marines Museum, personal communication).

4 Letter dated 2 June 1945, written from Streaky Bay (Daisy Bates Correspondence, La Trobe Library, Box 595, Envelope 4).

believed that Flinders and his men<sup>5</sup> were the ghosts of their own dead ancestors, come back from Koorannup, the home of the dead across the sea. They thought the full dress parade of the Marines was a Koorannup ceremony.

They made a dance of the visit and parade . . . I got all this from the only old man left, a grandson born about 1830 or 40. He saw the dance as a boy and taught it as a man. He covered his torso with red and put white pipeclay across the red and did with his club what he had seen his fathers and grandfathers do as the bayonets were exercised. Nebinyan died in 1908 [sic] a very old man and he could tell me all the history of the visit — its importance made it a sacred dance and memory . . .

Daisy Bates visited King George Sound in 1908, in the course of her investigations sponsored by the Western Australian government. Later she was in the camp at Katanning after Nebinyan's death, for she mentions in *The passing of the Aborigines*<sup>6</sup> that during the whole of her stay in the Aborigines' camp there a special fire was lighted every evening by a woman named Baiungan, to 'warm' the spirit of Nebinyan. He had died in the Katanning camp and to get to the site of his old shelter his spirit would have had to go through Baiungan's hut and might have harmed her children. The fire was lighted on the outskirts 'so that the spirit on its way back would rest and warm itself beside it and come no farther'. In her unpublished book<sup>7</sup> she records the following details about Nebinyan's prowess as a songmaker. Her account suggests that some local Aborigines were used as crew in the early days of whaling at Albany:

Nebinyan of Two People Bay, Tambellup etc. was the chief songmaker of his tribe, and composed many melodies which have become established as tribal ditties. The cadence and measure of these southern songs varies greatly, even amongst the singers themselves, the long drawn "aa" at the end of each song or verse, which is common in the Swan and Murray districts, being absent in Nebinyan's songs. In the recitative which dealt with Nebinyan's whaling experiences, the whole gamut of native feeling appeared to be expressed: the sorrow of Nebin [sic], as he saw his fire (home) recede further and further away; the stealthy gliding over the water towards the resting whale, the sharp look out, the growing excitement as the huge fish was approached; the great seas that threatened to swamp the whale

5 The identification with Flinders was presumably Mrs Bates' own interpretation of Nebinyan's words. Hallam's reference to Daisy Bates' account derived from an undateable newspaper cutting (Hallam 1975:21-22; personal communication).

6 Bates. 1966:88-89.

7 Daisy Bates Collection, Australian National Library (365/34/35).

boat; the swift and sure harpooning; the final surrender of the whale; the triumphant towing back to ship or beach, and the great rejoicing over the whale feast – each of these formed a song in itself, and the actions peculiar to each “stage” were faithfully rendered. Many portions of the song which had become familiar through frequent recital were chorused by the male listeners, who kept up a murmuring accompaniment throughout the recital, these choruses encouraging the chief singer and urging him on to fresh efforts by the favour thus shown to his compositions. The words of the song were merely the names applied by the natives to the details connected with whaling, but the actions accompanying the recitative illustrated the whole proceeding. These recitals, which were however not very frequent, often continued until the small hours of the morning, singers and audience being often contentedly droned to sleep by the continuous reiteration.

In the Daisy Bates manuscripts<sup>8</sup> I have found four copies of Nebinyan's genealogy, three in her handwriting and one typed by her secretary (between 1936 and 1941). The typed version in the chapter on genealogies<sup>9</sup> is the same as two in her handwriting, one a page from the original manuscript of her book<sup>10</sup> and one in a notebook titled *Southern Pedigrees Book II*.<sup>11</sup> It is not clear whether the last is an actual field notebook or one she wrote up later. The fourth copy,<sup>12</sup> also in her handwriting, is inserted into the typed chapter on languages, just before a vocabulary described as Kurin Wongi, from east of Kataning, collected from two old women and one old man. This version is slightly different and may be the earlier ‘MSS’ to which Mrs Bates refers in the other three copies, since it shows the methods of spelling and presenting genealogies which she used before Professor A.R. Radcliffe-Brown suggested different methods of recording.<sup>13</sup>

The typed version of the genealogy is reproduced below, with my translations inserted in square brackets. Mrs Bates followed the conventional practice of using capitals for males and lower case for females. Above each name is the kinship term identifying the person's relationship to Nebinyan; below the name she specifies moiety, totem, a place or locality name, and language. The sign (=) indicates marriage.

8 I have examined the Daisy Bates collections in the Australian National Library, Canberra; the La Trobe Library, Melbourne; the State Library of South Australia, Adelaide; the Barr Smith Library, Adelaide University; the Battye Library, Perth; and the University of Queensland Library. I am indebted to the many librarians who have assisted me.

9 ANL 365/8/81.

10 ANL 365/8/262.

11 ANL 365/8/275.

12 ANL 365/41/3.

13 White (in press).

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NEBINYAN

over 80

Nebinyan was the last Two People Bay district native. His father's father saw Flinders.

Nebinyan's fathers were "gij-a burdon-ap-birder wani", makers of the burdon (heavy war spear)

makers (binig gj burdon - making the burdon spear) of that district (Two People Bay, and apparently further inland) became extinct, all except Yagong, a blind old man now in Katanning.

Man [father]	=	Ngank or gaiung [mother]
BURDUWUN		Nungilan
Wordung [moiety, crow]		Manitch [moiety, white cockatoo]
Merderang [totem, kind of fish]		Ngwar [totem, kind of possum]
Yilbering [place name]		Yulingarap, near [place name]
Two People Bay		Two People Bay
Minung [language]		Minung

	kord [spouse]		Ngunt [younger sibling]	
NEBINYAN	= (1)	Nguranit = (2)	Ngurakoyt	TAIRIT
Wordung		Manitch		Tutinwar
Merderang		Bwongar (sheoak)		Wordung
Yilbering		Takilirap		Merderang
Minung		Lake Andrew		Yilbering
		Minung		Minung
	N.C.			

Kulong [child]	Kulong
KARALIT	Kaneran
Manitch	Manitch
Merderang	Ngalamar (mullet)
Yilbering	Yilbering
Minung	Minung
	d.unm.

From earlier "MSS" [sic]

Nebin was born at a place on Oyster Harbor Bay, 5 miles from Albany, called Kattaburnup, and is therefore the last remaining Albany district native. All his people are dead, except Kurralit [sic] who went away to the Blackwood or Bridgetown, and is believed to have married there.

On the handwritten page from which this was typed Mrs Bates has written in pencil in the margin (presumably after the page had been typed):

("Boney") Nebin or Nebinyan, a very old man in 1910, whose grandfathers' group saw Flinders in 1801 and learned a new dance from his parade of the marines, The Kurannup (heaven dance).

In the other, probably earlier, version of the genealogy inserted into the chapter on languages, Nebinyan's parents are given as 'Boormuwan' and 'Ngungulan'. This genealogy specifies that his younger brother and sister Tairit and Tootinwur 'remained unmarried'. Nebinyan's first marriage to 'Ngooranit, a Taakelerup (Andrew Lake) woman' was

childless. This version explains that Nebinyan 'also married Ngoolagurt', that her moiety was 'Wordungmat (a wrong or "mootch" marriage)', and that their two children 'Danmera and Kuralit died'.

In this version the two children are entered as belonging to the Wordung ('Wordungmat') moiety, following their father in a society where moiety affiliation was patrilineal.<sup>14</sup> But in the typed (presumably later) version the children are recorded as Manitch, the opposite of their father, and their mother's moiety is not specified. In many, perhaps most, Aboriginal societies with named divisions – moieties, sections or subsections – in the case of a wrong marriage the 'father is thrown away' and the children belong to the division they would have been in had the mother married correctly. Mrs Bates herself noted this as a general rule,<sup>15</sup> but because discrepant versions have survived we cannot know with certainty the moiety identification of Nebinyan's children. Inheritance of totemic identification is also not clear in this genealogy. In the typed version Nebinyan, Tairit and Tutinwar have the same totem as their father, as does Nebinyan's son Karalit, but not his daughter 'Kaneran'. In the discrepant version Nebinyan's brother Tairit has a totem 'Wej (emu)' different from both parents, Nebinyan's daughter has a totem different from his, but her mother's totem is not given in either version. This suggests that totemic affiliation is linked with place of birth, although this is not stated definitely in Mrs Bates' writings about the area.

The discrepant handwritten version includes more extended notes than appear in the other three copies:

This pedigree was obtained from Nebinyan, the only living member of the groups whose parents and grandparents had contacted [sic] with Flinders in 1801.

Nebinyan was born at Oyster Harbour Bay, 5 miles from Albany, called Kattaburnup. Nebinyan must have been 80 when he died at Katanning in 1910 [sic]. His pedigree goes back towards Flinders' visit which his father and grandfather perhaps had seen and known and had learned the Kurannup Song and Dance from the Marines parade, given the group by Flinders whose association with the group was most truly British in principle and honour during his three weeks there for repairs to his ship.

The Aborigines Department files do not with certainty identify the Nebinyan or Boney described by Mrs Bates, but some entries refer to a man of appropriate age in the Albany area. A 'Boney alias Bonaparte' born about 1846 received rations there in 1898; in 1901 his son was sent to the New Norcia Mission because Boney's wife, presumably the mother, had died; in 1905 his camp and others were destroyed in a fire

14 Bates 1905-06.

15 ANL 365/6/433.

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at Albany.<sup>16</sup> 'Nedenyan alias Boney', an old man from 'Sandalwood', Salt River, was at Broome Hill and in need of rations in 1910, and a 'Boney' born about 1840 was receiving clothes or rugs at Katanning in 1911.<sup>17</sup>

The ceremony described to Daisy Bates by Nebinyan is not recorded in early writings about the Albany area.<sup>18</sup> But her report is unlikely to be sheer invention. The likelihood that the 1801 performance of the Marines drill gave rise to the ritual described by Nebinyan is confirmed by another report from northern Australia. Dr Hermann Klaatsch, a German anthropologist who visited Melville Island in 1906, described a Tiwi dance derived from observations of the Marines at the Port Dundas settlement in 1824-1829.<sup>19</sup>

The crowning piece of these dance performances was the obviously unmistakable imitation of the sailors and officers of the old military settlement of Port Dundas. One of the two dancers acted the part of a marine [Schiffs-Soldaten] continuously kicking his legs behind him and moving his arms as if he was pulling on a ship's rope. At the same time the other dancers stood stiff and upright to attention and with majestic hand movements imitated an officer giving orders.<sup>20</sup> The memory of the military settlement has been preserved for three generations which proves in the first place that Melville Island people are excellent actors, and also how they maintain their vivid traditions.<sup>21</sup>

Elsewhere Klaatsch said of this dance:

The performers were painted most beautifully with white clay, and very likely this decoration is an imitation of white man's apparel. The hands and feet being devoid of coloration, the impression of white dress is conveyed.<sup>22</sup>

16 I must thank Lois Tilbrook of Mount Lawley College for this information, derived from Aborigines Department files (1898/643; 1901/989; 1905/253; 1911/479A).

17 Aborigines Department files 1910/479. Mrs Bates' notes suggest that Nebinyan died in 1908 or 1910. A further entry (AD 1913/1186) concerning a 'Bonaparte', his wife Polly and children Daisy, Toby, Carbaggie and Rosie who received rations at Albany in 1913 probably refers to another man. Mrs Tilbrook points out that there was much migration in the southwest at this period.

18 For example George Fletcher Moore, Isaac Scott Nind and Alexander Collie (Green 1979); D.A.P. West (1976 and personal communication).

19 Klaatsch 1907:684, translated by James Urry.

20 John Campbell (1834:153) reported that the Melville Islanders were 'very sensitive to any thing like ridicule. They are good mimics, have a facility in catching up words, and are gifted with considerable observation'.

21 No other accounts of this dance have been located, but the Tiwi of Melville Island are noted for incorporating their observations of European and Asian life in their own dance and ritual (Brandl 1970).

22 Klaatsch 1908:590.

There is considerable ethnographic evidence about the post-contact spread of sacred and non-sacred ceremonies. But the origins of ceremonies, songs and dance styles are poorly described. Throughout the continent the Aboriginal belief was — and still is today — that the sacred ceremonies were first performed by Ancestral Beings. They gave them to humans to perform in perpetuity, exactly like the original in every detail. No changes must be made in music, words or dance steps. Performers believe that they obey this injunction absolutely.<sup>23</sup> Admittedly a less sacred, although heroically inspired, ceremony could arise from an individual's dreams.<sup>24</sup>

Daisy Bates' letter concerning Nebinyan's information is one of the few records we have of the exact origin of a sacred ceremony. If the sacred ritual of some Aborigines of King George Sound did indeed derive from the ceremonial drill of Flinders' Marines it is interesting evidence of how an historical event entered Aboriginal mythology. The belief that the first European visitors were the returned spirits or reincarnations of dead Aborigines was widespread throughout Australia. If Flinders' party were regarded as having returned from Kooranup, the home of the dead, then they shared something of the sacredness of the Ancestral Heroes. It is understandable that the ritual they performed was regarded as sacred, to be repeated by the men to whom it was revealed, and by their sons and grandsons.

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23 Certainly the Western Desert women who have shown me the secret-sacred women's *inma* believe this.

24 For example, Berndt 1950:26-27, 31-32, 53-54.

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