

The Australian Medicine Man (*Der Australische Medizenmann*)

by Helmut Petri, translated by Ian Campbell, edited by Kim Akerman

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Helmut Petri was a German anthropologist who first visited the Kimberley as part of the so-called Frobenius Expedition in the late 1930s, just prior to World War Two. He would return to Australia repeatedly after the war, in the 1950s and '60s, but this treatise on the Australian medicine man as well as his ethnography on the Kimberley groups he worked with (*The Dying World in Northwest Australia*, also translated and published by Hesperian Press, Petri 2011) were both the result of his first Australian fieldwork stint.

The original German text of this book was published in 1952 and 1953 across two volumes of the Vatican's ethnographic journal *Annali Lateranensi* (Petri 1952, 1953). As such it came seven years after A.P. Elkin's seminal *Aboriginal Men of High Degree*, but does not cite that work despite referencing other writings of Elkin's with clear appreciation. In the postwar, pre-Internet era, it is understandable how Petri could have been unaware of Elkin's important contribution on this subject. More surprising is that Elkin seemingly remained unaware of Petri's contribution even in the revised 1977 edition of *Aboriginal Men of High Degree*. Given Elkin's extensive scholarship this is a good indication of just how obscure Petri's original choice of publication was. That in itself makes this English translation of *The Australian Medicine Man* a laudable effort by Hesperian Press. Prior to this publication, Elkin's work had long been the principal source on what could perhaps be called Australian shamanism (Petri briefly considers whether shamanism is an appropriate term for the Australian context and concludes that it is (see also Lommel and Mowaljarlai 1994)), and as such I will be drawing some comparisons throughout this review.

Petri's work, much like Elkin's, is part literature review, part original ethnography. Unlike Elkin, who worked across many different regions of Australia and was able to draw on additional contemporary data from his PhD students such as Ron and Catherine Berndt, Petri only worked in one area and spent a comparatively brief nine months in the Australian field. Yet in many ways it is the first 34 pages of original data and its subsequent application at different points of the book that are the clear highlights of this text.

Without personal background in Wunambal and Ngarinyin culture I cannot comment on the accuracy of Petri's account, but it is clear that he was able to obtain deep and detailed insights into the people's psycho-spiritual world view. And so despite his introductory qualification that his data 'is perhaps no less fragmentary than many other sources', what he presents is unmatched by any of the other literature he reviews in this volume.

We learn from Petri that the *banman* (the term for 'medicine man' in this region) obtains his power from the rainbow serpent (*ungud*) who initiates him over the course of extended mystical experiences. This initiation involves the manipulation of the initiate's *yayari*, or spiritual essence, and leads to the development of a host of psychic powers, such as clairvoyance, the ability to heal all manner of ailments by psycho-spiritual means and the capacity to send one's soul on journeys beyond the body. Petri records the term *miriru* as capturing this collection of spiritual powers held by a medicine man.

Leaving the body during sleep states is well documented as an important concept across Aboriginal Australia (e.g. Elkin 1977, Glaskin 2008, Hume 2002, McCaul 2008) and it is clear from Petri's account that it was one of the key skills that set the *banman* apart from ordinary people. The *banman* was seen as not sleeping like a normal person: 'If he is lying in camp and has his eyes closed, then that is not sleep in the ordinary sense, it is *miriru*, and he is sending his *anguman* (shadow) away like a willy-willy' (p. 12).

These journeys can take the *banman* to the land of the dead, to encounter the creation ancestors, or to observe distant events among the living. Petri suggests:

We must accord these dream journeys a special place in the Aborigines' intellectual life, for through the medium of the Doctor as a chosen and inspired personage they help to tie more closely the bond between human society and the operative forces of fertility, generation and increase in nature that is so important for the continuance of all life (p. 13).

Cultural change was a topic that dominated much of Petri's anthropological work, and this interest shines through also in the points he highlights with regard to the soul journeys of the *banman*. Corroborees are one of the creative products of soul journeys, which allow the *banman* to create new ceremonies on

the basis of their extra-corporeal observations among the ancestors or in distant lands. In a fascinating ethnographic vignette of cultural contact, Petri describes what his informants called the 'White Town People' corroboree, which had been devised by a *banman*, 'whom the dream journey reputedly took to Perth almost 2,000 miles away [and who] was trying to express in this way how the whites move about in a large city' (p. 14). According to Petri, the composer had never physically left his land.

Another instance of social transformation noted by Petri was the appearance of a new kind of doctor in response to the *Kurangara* cult ceremonies arriving from the Western Desert and beyond. These doctors were apparently called 'devil-doctors', not because they were inherently bad but because they were working with new kinds of spirits, the *djanba*, who introduced the *Kurangara* ceremonies and were considered extremely dangerous (see Petri 2011 for a more detailed discussion of the *Kurangara*, also Swain 1993). But more fundamentally challenging to the traditional order, according to Petri, was the appearance of the Flying Doctors, who manifested some of the same skills that for so long had been the prerogative of the *banman*: healing people and the ability to fly, albeit with planes, thereby seriously undermining the *banman's* social standing. Much like Elkin, Petri believed that traditional cultural values and practices, including the role of the medicine man, were doomed to extinction. As of 2016 this has not yet come to pass, for even in what would be considered highly acculturated urban and rural areas I continue to meet people who use and know of men and women who are believed to have remarkable psychic healing powers (McCaul 2008).

Also like Elkin, Petri's work is couched almost exclusively in terms of medicine *men*. His literature review includes only one brief example of a medicine woman conducting a ceremony in New South Wales. Given this lack of data, it is somewhat surprising when he concludes, almost as an afterthought on the final pages of his text:

Certainly medicine women were observed now and then, who even received respect and recognition from the tribal community. But they were never able to gain power and influence to the same extent as their male colleagues. Medicine women hardly had any importance worth mentioning in social life. We have passed over them here chiefly for these reasons (p. 183–84).

This reason seems disingenuous as the question of power and influence is only one of numerous angles of analysis Petri pursues. Much more time is spent, for example, on how people obtained their powers and it would have been very interesting to learn whether the process for women was the same as for men. And in any event, it is clear from the ethnographic examples Petri has assembled, that many medicine men also did not enjoy greater social standing

than any other initiated man. I doubt that Petri deliberately excluded data about medicine women and consider it more likely that he simply did not have sufficient information for an informed discussion. It would have been nice had he admitted so much. Based on more recent work among the *ngangkari* of the Western Desert (NPY Women's Council 2003) and also based on oral history accounts I was given by people from the corner country of South Australia, Queensland and New South Wales, it is clear that medicine women could develop the same kinds of powers and be held in the same high social regard as medicine men.

Topics Petri covers as part of the literature review include the way in which medicine men obtain their powers (always some variation of mystical experience induced by spiritual forces), the kind of powers they manifest (dream journeys and mediumship, shape-changing and clairvoyance) and the medicine man's responsibilities for society. Elkin assembled similar data, but interestingly Petri includes sources not covered by Elkin. Like any literature review it can feel a bit like browsing through a catalogue and so does not make for the most gripping read. But Petri was clearly a thorough scholar, considering the inevitable limitations of access to material at the time of his work in Germany, and for any serious student of this subject matter this book will form a useful access point to the sources and a valuable complement to Elkin (1977).

As already stated, Hesperian Press has done us a favour in publishing this obscure work. They are also to be commended for including the original journal page numbers in the text, allowing the serious scholar (the most likely audience for this work) to go back to the original if they feel the need. However, small changes could have made the product even better. Including an index could have added great value as could have adding some headers for signposting throughout. Unlike the original German publications, in this book quotes are not always clearly distinguished from the text, which can cause confusion on occasions, and unfortunately there are a fair number of typos. The translation is good for the most part, but some sections are clunky and perhaps too much guided by an attempt to follow the original words than convey their meaning. It was also surprising that the translator expressed his inability to translate the admittedly obscure word 'Subache', when a Google search revealed it as a term used by Leo Frobenius for a particular kind of African witch. As such Petri's use of it in the Australian context seems to have been as a term of art from his particular ethnographic school, much as anthropologists in Australia embraced terms from one region and applied them across the country for similar phenomena (the Pilbara term *tal* for 'increase ceremonies' comes to mind). While these minor editorial issues may distract the casual reader, they are unlikely to dissuade the serious researcher from taking advantage of this important contribution to our understanding of the Australian shamanic tradition.

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