



Kimberley Society

Book Note

***The Australian Medicine Man (Der Australische Medizinmann)* by Helmut Petri, translated by Ian Campbell, edited by Kim Akerman. [Hesperian Press](#), Carlisle, WA, 2014. Soft cover, French flap, 194 pages, ISBN 978-0-85905-583-3. RRP \$55.**

Helmut Petri (1907–1986) was a German anthropologist whose *Der Australische Medizinmann* was based on fieldwork among Aboriginal people in the Kimberley in 1938–1939, but not published in his native language until after World War 2 army service (including time as a prisoner of war). It was written originally as his 'habilitation' or senior doctoral thesis, on Australian shamanism, and submitted in 1949; he had been awarded an initial PhD in 1933.

Petri was a well-rounded scholar who had studied economics, history and philosophy as well as physical anthropology and pre-history (archaeology) in Berlin, Rome and Vienna, and he had travelled to countries such as Greece and Turkey for research purposes before coming to Australia in the spring of 1938 as the leader of an expedition organised by the Frobenius Institute (of ethnology) in his birthplace, Cologne.

Der Australische Medizinmann was published in 1952 and another related work, *Sterbend Welt in Nordwest Australien (The Dying World in North West Australia)* in 1954; this was first published in English by Hesperian Press in 2011. As with *The Dying World*, *The Australian Medicine Man* has been translated by Dr Ian Campbell of Armidale, NSW, and edited by eminent Western Australian anthropologist Dr Kim Akerman (now resident in Tasmania). Doongan station proprietor [and Kimberley Society member] Susan Bradley, described by the *Australian* newspaper's Nicolas Rothwell as 'queen of the Kimberley' and 'raconteur extraordinaire', has contributed an informed foreword in which she acknowledges Akerman's 'many years in the field', writing 'extensively on the anthropology of the Kimberley'. It was mainly due to him and the late Dr Grahame Walsh, she says, that Petri's 'research was not lost to English speaking scholars, and most importantly the Aborigines about whose identity, country, culture, traditions and forebears, these two studies are written.' Walsh, an authority inter-alia on Kimberley rock art, died before the editing of the Petri books was completed.

In his introduction to [Cologne to the Kimberley : Studies of Aboriginal Life in Northwest Australia by Five German Scholars in the First Half of the 20th Century](#), Akerman commented that he had been able to gain access over the years to various 'papers and other publications' by European anthropologists only by having them translated, and

In the Kimberley, where I have focused a lot of my attention, there was in fact very little academic material written in English that had not been the result of research conducted with a focus on social organisation or modelled on the Radcliffe-Brown/Elkin approach to anthropological research. It seemed to me that only the European trained anthropologists and linguists cast a wider net, one that embraced economics, material culture and rock art – even the latter was, until relatively recently, only peripherally touched on by Australian anthropologists.

Australians in this respect (and others) were

... a monolingual nation. Works that had not been initially presented in English were generally ignored by most Australian anthropologists and rarely referenced.

A R Radcliffe-Brown and A P Elkin were the founding professors of anthropology at the University of Sydney; Elkin was Radcliffe-Brown's post-doctoral student and conducted his first major Australian field research in that capacity in the Kimberley during the 1920s. Some of that research was drawn on by Elkin in what was possibly his most famous work, *Aboriginal Men of High Degree*, which as its title suggests, deals with Aboriginal shamanism throughout mainland Australia.

Radcliffe-Brown, an Englishman, had earlier conducted fieldwork in Western Australia with the largely self-taught anthropologist Daisy Bates; they fell out and Bates famously accused Radcliffe-Brown of gross plagiarism at a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Melbourne in 1914. Radcliffe-Brown left Australia for the University of Chicago in 1931; he was replaced by Elkin, who held the chair until his retirement in 1956 and continued to edit the journal *Oceania* until his death in 1979.

Elkin's influence was immense throughout Australian anthropology during that period, but his and Petri's paths seem not to have crossed much professionally if at all, which may have something to do with the opinion expressed above by Akerman. Petri does acknowledge some of Elkin's early articles and in particular his influential 1938 book, *The Australian Aborigines: How to understand them*, in his – Petri's – bibliography, but there is no mention of *Aboriginal Men of High Degree* in *Der Australische Medizinmann*, and vice versa.

As Akerman points out, Petri may well not have had access in Europe to the first edition of Elkin's book, which was published in 1945, but Elkin did not refer to Petri's *Der Australische Medizinmann* either in the second edition of Elkin's book in 1977, 25 years after *Der Australische Medizinmann's* appearance in German. This may simply be, as Dr Akerman says, on the basis that 'neither scholar had had the opportunity to read each other's seminal works on the topic.'

In 1977 Elkin did acknowledge that:

During the ten years between 1928, the year of my work amongst the Ngarinyin, and that of Dr Petri in 1938, the Aborigines had improved their English, a result mainly of working on Munja Aboriginal Cattle Station, Walcott Inlet. Consequently at least some of them became better informants and so Dr Petri obtained more material on medicine-men and their making than I did.

But, as Akerman points out, Elkin was referring here not to *Der Australische Medizinmann* but to the relevant sections of *Sterbendewelt in nordwest-Australien*, about which Petri had said:

The accounts about medicine men in the Kimberleys now following are unfortunately incomplete, perhaps no less fragmentary than many other sources for Australian cultural history. That is firstly because the time available for our fieldwork was too short, secondly we made the same mistake from the start as most observers of Australian Aboriginal life: we allowed ourselves to be so taken up by more striking phenomena of the tribal cultures that the figures of the medicine man at first seemed to us to be of not very vital importance. When we realized this error, it was to some extent already too late to make up lost ground.

Given that Elkin's book remained until the Hesperian Press publications one of very few readily available sources in English on traditional Australian medicine men, this gives added point to Akerman's comment about Australian monolingualism. At all events, anyone interested in these matters should obtain copies of these new Hesperian Press translations as a matter of urgency.

Peter Gifford MPHA

Editor's Note: A longer version of this book note appeared in the newsletter of the [Professional Historians Association \(WA\) Inc](http://www.professionalhistorians.org.au/) in June 2016. Dr Peter Gifford is a fully accredited member of the PHA (WA).