



Kimberley Society

Book Note

***The Dying World in Northwest Australia* by Helmut Petri.** Hesperian Press, Carlisle (WA), 2011. Soft cover with jacket, 276 pages plus x, illustrated. ISBN 978-0-85905-091-3. Recommended retail price \$45.

Published by Albert Limbach in 1954 as *Sterbende welt in nordwest Australien*, this volume has been translated by Dr Ian Campbell. It has a foreword by Susan Bradley (of Doongan Station in the Kimberley) and an introduction by anthropologist Kim Akerman. The foreword explains the collaborative effort that went into the translation and the editing, and it stresses the importance of the work to both scholars and the Aboriginal people whose culture it covers. The introduction provides background on Helmut Petri and context for his 1938–1939 study of the Ngarinyin (in the north-west Kimberley) and the Nyigina (in the lower Fitzroy River basin). Akerman writes in part:

At the time of study and writing Petri envisioned a dim, if not grim, future for the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley... In his later writings Petri was to acknowledge that the dynamics of cultural change rather than being totally destructive averted stagnation and facilitated cultural renaissance and continuity.

As the leader of the first Frobenius Expedition in Australia, Petri viewed his subjects as culturally discrete groups affected by both their region's recent history and their ongoing contact with Europeans. His writing, as well as offering great insight into the indigenous people's culture, philosophy, and daily life, also reveals a little about the race relations prevailing at the time of his visit. He comments, for example, on 'the black twist introduced by the whites' and on how that tobacco could influence the Aboriginal people's decisions about where they would go and whether they would accept invitations to work at missions and on stations.

The volume comprises three parts. Part 1 introduces the Ngarinyin and discusses their material culture. Part 2 moves on to their spiritual culture. Part 3 is devoted to the Nyigina and their mythical view of the world. All of it is written in an easy to read narrative style in which bold subheadings signal topic changes, e.g., Part 1 topics include weapons, tools, household utensils, watercraft, forms of dwelling, binding material, and adornment. Stories or myths appear in connection with some topics, and nicely executed sketches occasionally depict weapons or other objects. Figure 4, for instance, shows a bush bucket or *karáki*, which Petri describes as 'the most striking and remarkable household implement in the Central Kimberley'. Sometimes a note points the reader to one of the 20 plates at the end of the book. The plates show people, ceremonies, weapons, cultural sites, shelters, rock art and more.

Petri draws on the published works of his fellow expedition member Dr Andreas Lommel, the Reverend J. R. B. Love from Kunmunya Mission, and the anthropologist A. P. Elkin; often comparing his findings to theirs. With regard to the Ngarinyin, he notes that, even with only ten years separating his visit from Elkin's, 'the ancient native culture was in many respects becoming more fragile'.

The coverage of the Nyigina relates mostly to their social organisation and their myths. Petri acknowledges that it is only 'a fragment' and explains that two of his three informants 'were living at the Beagle Bay Mission ... and had spent many years of their life with the Nyol-nyol, whose homeland was there'. The other informant was part of the Ngarinyin community. While Part 3 is likely to interest some Kimberley Society members less than the earlier parts with their coverage of rock art, many are likely to find the book appealing in its entirety.

Cathie Clement