

Janice Reid, *Sorcerers and Healing Spirits: Continuity and Change in an Aboriginal Healing System*. Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1983. Pp. xxv, 182, maps, photos, appendix, index. Paper \$15.95.

Reviewed by Paul Alan Cox, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah

Yirrkala settlement, northeast Arnhem Land, Australia. Mandjinga, an aboriginal woman in her late twenties, steps outside her small home at night to investigate a noise. She suddenly collapses with severe chest pains and quickly loses consciousness, victim of a *galka* (aboriginal sorcerer) attack. Her family calls a health worker, who transports her to the hospital at Nhulunbuy where she is found to have contusions and lacerations on her hand, armpit, and underneath her chest. Regaining consciousness in the surgical ward, Mandjinga is found by the nursing sister to be in great pain with considerable stupor. The hospital staff assures a crowd of forty of her clan members gathered outside the hospital that she will recover within twenty-four hours. The next day, when Mandjinga is clearly still seriously ill, her clan dispatches a *marrnggitj* or traditional healer to her bedside in an attempt to save her life. While preparing to place the sacred healing and divining stones on Mand-

jinga's breasts, the *marrnggitj* is discovered by the nursing sister, who immediately orders him to leave the hospital. Later, the wife of a missionary comes to Mandjinga with tapes of hymns and Bible readings, telling Mandjinga that she will have to choose between the "witchdoctor" and Jesus. Mandjinga makes a slow recovery during magical therapy with the *marrnggitj*. She is grateful for the kindness shown by the missionary's wife and for the attention of the health workers, but affirms that illness caused by a *galka* attack is not amenable to treatment by Western medicine.

This anecdote from Janice Reid's remarkable book on Australian aboriginal healing systems, *Sorcerers and Healing Spirits*, typifies the inherent epistemological and conceptual conflicts between Western medicine, Western religions, and aboriginal cosmologies as expressed in healing practices in a variety of preliterate societies. As can be imagined, the gulf is profound, yet Reid ambitiously attempts to bridge it by producing an empathetic but detailed exploration of Australian aboriginal ethnomedicine. Reid's objectives are not merely to document traditional healing practices of the Yolngu people of Yirrkala, but to provide a philosophical justification of these practices within the context of an aboriginal cosmology. Her motivation is the fact that

most people who work with Aborigines, including health personnel, are unaware of the complexity and theoretical elegance of contemporary Aboriginal medical systems. It is my hope that this study of one such system will not only be of interest to academic colleagues but helpful to doctors, nurses, and others working in cross-cultural settings, most particularly in Aboriginal health care. (P. xiv)

In the tradition of Evans-Pritchard's work on the Azande of Africa, Reid explores the rich tapestry of aboriginal belief systems and concludes that "Yolngu beliefs about causality in illness are not illogical superstitions. . . . Sickness, sorcery, and social events are linked in logical structure which is comparable to that of a Western. Scientific theory . . ." (p. xx). In making such a surprising assertion, Reid is indeed on solid ground, since Yolngu ethnomedical theory, as elucidated by her, would indeed qualify as science to several recent philosophers of science, most notably Feyerabend and possibly Kuhn. It is indeed a tragedy of major proportions that current pharmacological research tends to ignore ethnomedicine's potential as an important source of information for Western medicine. Such ethnocentrism in scientific circles has

not always been the case. As recently as twenty years ago, major pharmaceutical firms routinely retained ethnobotanists and anthropologists to investigate aboriginal healing practices; the seminal work of Fricke at Stanford on the Subanan of Mindanao was in fact supported by the pharmaceutical house of Smith, Kline, and Beckman. Nor were such studies without their fruits; as recently as 1980 the National Prescription Audit revealed that 25 percent of all prescriptions issued in the United States were derived directly from plants. Most of these were in fact identified through studies of native pharmacopeias; one need only cite quinine, disogen steroids, or digitalis to prove the value of ethnomedicine. Yet time is running out for studies such as Reid's. In twenty to thirty years most opportunities for ethnomedicinal studies will be gone, victims not only of encroaching Westernization and tropical deforestation, but also of overt hostility from Western medical practitioners. In Samoa, for example, the *taulasea* or native healers begin practice only after lengthy apprenticeships, and they rival trained botanists in their knowledge of the local floras, using a precise lexicon of terms to discuss plant taxonomy and morphology, particularly of pharmacologically active plants. Yet they are routinely dismissed as "bush doctors" and their access to patients is severely restricted by the local medical community.

The fact is that, as Reid amply demonstrates, traditional healers and sorcerers serve a variety of important functions in aboriginal societies ranging from psychotherapy to law enforcement. Thus to the Yolngu, the *galka* or sorcerers in fact serve mainly to exact penalties for transgressions of religious restrictions such as uttering sacred words in the wrong place or stealing sacred objects. *Galka* also serve to enforce reciprocal ritual and economic obligations between various clans, as well as to avenge personal grievances over broken marriage contracts or adulterous behavior. The Yolngu are not without respite from the destructive actions of the *galka*, however, since the native healers or *marrnggitj* are looked to by community members for "reassurance, healing, explanation and protection when serious illness and death threaten" (p. 57). Although *marrnggitj* differ from other Yolngu in their healing powers and knowledge, recognition of *marrnggitj* is a community function that requires a potential healer to have had a supernatural experience, to demonstrate an ability to cure the sick, and to attract a clientele and establish a practice. The communal endowment of a *marrnggitj* is made clear by Reid:

Whatever the predisposing personal attributes of those who become *marrnggitj*, there is evidence that becoming a *marrng-*

gitj is as much a matter of the collective wishes of the group as it is of a person's inclinations. Rather than individuals being born marrnggitj or achieving this status, the office appears largely to be thrust upon them. (P. 66)

Thus native healers in the Yolngu culture are much more important to aboriginal society than, say, M.D.'s are to Western society since they are the embodiment of communal wishes and the means of maintaining communal cohesiveness.

Sorcerers and Healing Spirits is a profoundly humane book, a book with heart, and yet a book that clearly presents Yolngu concepts of disease, etiology, and therapy in considerable detail. Janice Reid is to be congratulated for writing one of the better ethnomedical treatises to appear in recent years. My only complaint with the book is that Reid fails to give sufficient botanical details of Yolngu herbal treatments; perhaps we can hope for further work on this topic in the future.