

# **FROM THE "DREAMTIME" TO THE PRESENT: THE CHANGING ROLE OF ABORIGINAL ROCK PAINTINGS IN WESTERN ARNHEM LAND, AUSTRALIA**

PAUL S. C. TACON,  
Department of Anthropology,  
Trent University,  
Peterborough, Ontario,  
Canada, K9J 7B8

## **ABSTRACT/RESUME**

The author reviews the history and style of Aboriginal rock art in western Arnhem Land, Australia, a history spanning several thousand years. Although the "x-ray" style is of particular significance, there are many variations of subject, colour, and pattern. The art links the people of today with Dreamtime.

L'auteur passe en revue l'histoire et le style de l'art aborigène creusé dans le roc dans la terre d'Arnhem de l'ouest, en Australie, une histoire qui embrasse plusieurs milliers d'années. Bien que le style "rayon X" soit d'une importance particulière, il y a beaucoup de changements de sujet, de couleur et de modèle. L'art relie les gens d'aujourd'hui au monde de rêve.

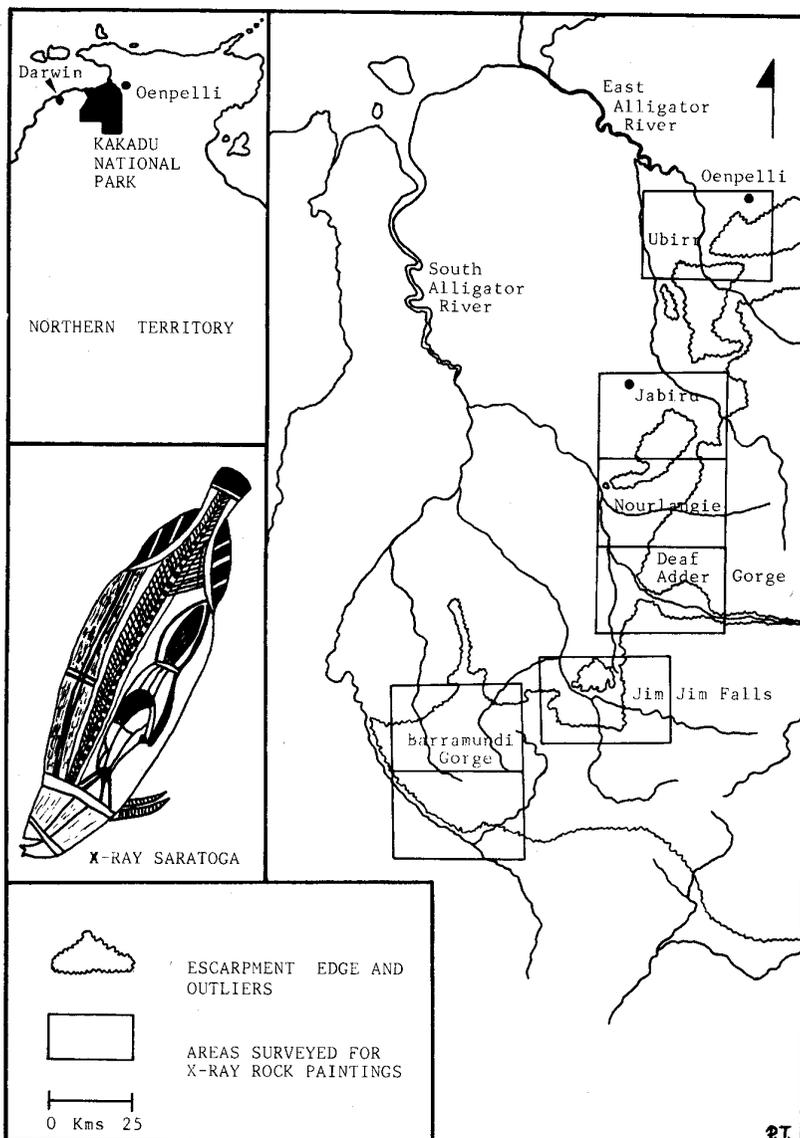
When the first Australians arrived on the continent 40,000 or more years ago, they entered a land never before seen or experienced by human beings. As they progressed across its bulk the continent's geology made impressions on human consciousness for the first time. This was the Dreamtime and the first Australians became ancestors to all subsequent generations of Aboriginal people. In a sense, the impressions of the landscape they experienced "created" the landscape for subsequent human and natural use. Through their actions, via their paths and journeys, and as a consequence of their experiences, the Australian continent registered on the human consciousness for the first time. Knowledge acquired was passed down to succeeding generations.<sup>1</sup>

Further modifications of the landscape, as a consequence of volcanic activity, earthquakes, major short-term and long-term changes in climate, lightning strikes, cyclones, floods and other forces of nature, were witnessed by the Ancestors. These were remembered and recorded as dramatic Dreamtime events that involved the Ancestors or were brought about by their actions or inactions. The first Australians further modified the landscape they encountered themselves through fire and 'burning off' practices. A 40,000 year legacy of major changes in the history of these peoples has thus been passed down to the present in mythic, dramatic and visual form. This was and is the Dreamtime. As Ronald Berndt has pointed out: "Australian Aborigines recognized the social value of the past in the present: not the past per se but particular elements of that past, including the inevitability of change" (1984:3). Many of the experiences, 'laws', lessons, important events and changes to the pool of Dreamtime knowledge have consequently been retained and passed on to subsequent generations in symbolic form. Much of the recent body of rock painting in Western Arnhem Land records and expresses aspects of this legacy.

### **Interpreting West Arnhem Land Rock Art**

The most recent period of rock painting in Western Arnhem Land (Figure 1) was one of great diversity and elaboration. It differs from earlier periods in terms of subject matter, form, use of colour and symbolic content. It is this art that is still very important to Aboriginal people even though some of the paintings in this style were done hundreds of years ago. This recent style has been labelled 'x-ray' by some scholars because paintings which depict internal features tend to predominate, but x-ray paintings (Figures 2 to 6) are part of a much larger artistic system (Tacon, 1987;1989b).

Most x-ray rock art appears to have been produced over the past 1,500 to 3,000 years when freshwater environmental conditions, similar to those of today, developed and persisted in the greater Kakadu landscape. Some



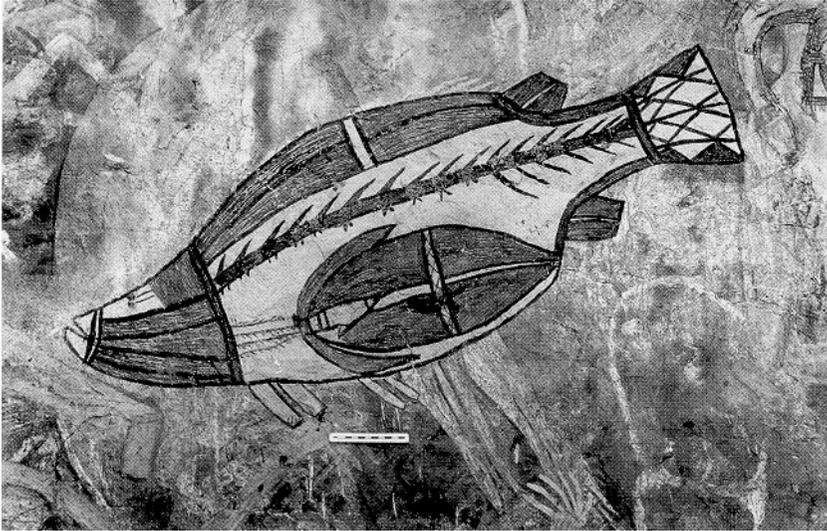
**Figure 1:** The location of the study area within Western Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia.

very simple monochromatic red x-ray forms, however, may be as old as 8,000 years of age and some aspects of internal detail can be found in rare instances of earlier art styles as well. The most recent x-ray rock paintings were produced in the early 1960's by the Aboriginal artist Najombolmi. Many of the paintings found throughout Kakadu are attributed to him (Haskovec and Sullivan, 1989) (see Figures 5 and 6). Some of the others were made by close male relatives of Aboriginal elders living in Kakadu or adjacent areas today. They followed the stylistic conventions of their predecessors closely (Figure 7). Representations of the interior structures of creatures ranged from highly naturalistic to very abstract. Even European objects, such as guns and boats, sometimes had their internal features highlighted. Red, yellow, white and purple were the predominant colours but orange, pink, black and an introduced blue were used on occasion. Colour combinations in paintings varied from area to area and reflected the availability of pigments more than clan or moiety preferences. Thus particular colours were most frequently found near their sources in the landscape (Tacon, 1989b: 127-29).

The x-ray tradition continues on barks as well. Many early bark painters also painted in rock shelters.

Along with the x-ray paintings of humans, animals and mythical beings, numerous solid or stroke infill subjects were created. These differ from their x-ray counterparts only in terms of internal detail and otherwise have a similar form. Aboriginal people argue that they depict 'dead' or 'cooked' beings while x-ray paintings depict living creatures.<sup>2</sup> For them the two forms are part of a larger system of artistic expression. Paintings with solid or stroke infill are not incomplete x-ray paintings. X-ray art, however, has greater potential for expressing meaning, due to its multi-layered (manifold) form and structure and, as a consequence, figures more prominently in discussions about the art. It is ideally suited to artistic expression which is also manifold in nature. In the past many researchers have regarded x-ray forms as a form of explicit communication and have failed to recognize their wider use and potential.

Various forms of stick figures were also drawn or painted in shelters. These vary from static straightforward poses to energetic elaborate postures suggestive of movement and action. Around Ubirr, Oenpelli and the north-eastern edge of Kakadu, many large scenes of stick figures can be found arranged in postures suggestive of warfare. Often the stick figures hold spears or spear throwers. Many figures have open mouths suggesting cries of victory or anguish and most have male genitalia featured prominently. Limited skirmishes are known to have taken place across Arnhem Land (Mulaney, 1989:3; Warner, 1969:144-79) in the past; Aboriginal elders today feel



**Figure 2:** An x-ray barramundi, (*Lates calcarifer*) painted early this century.



**Figure 3:** X-ray barramundi, fork-taft catfish (*Hexanematchthys leptaspis*) and other species cover the walls and ceilings of many shelters at Ubirr.

that these paintings portray fights over land or women. Other stick figures were composed into hunting, ceremonial or domestic scenes or were painted as solitary, static entities. Most static stick figures lack sexual characteristics and appear 'casual' and non-specific.

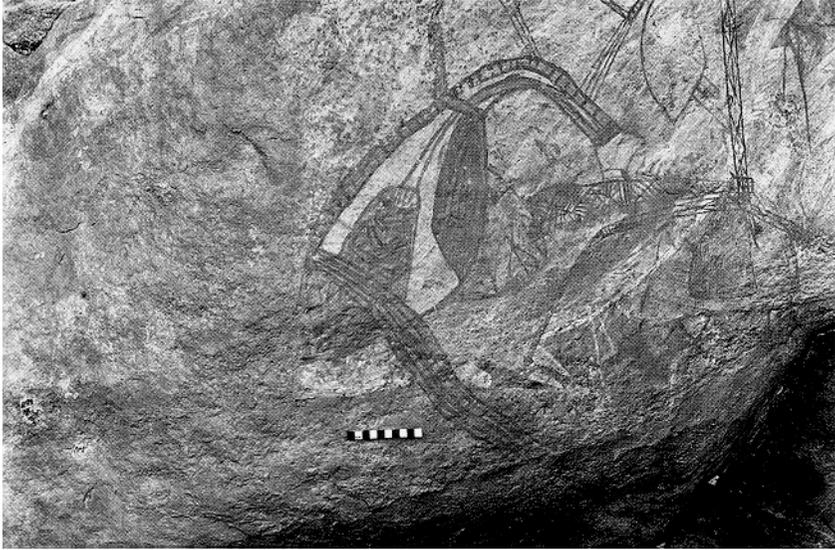
Generally, stick figures are more commemorative and historic in quality than x-ray or solid infill paintings in that they refer to specific events and have more-or-less set interpretations. Although this is true of most of the smaller, detailed figures, some of the large stick figures, over 30 cm in length and with exaggerated, attenuated limbs, are said to be depictions of Spiritual Beings, such as the Mimi, who inhabit the area. As well, ancient, pre-x-ray paintings of 'dynamic' stick figures (Figure 8) or other subjects are said to have been done by the Mimi before Aborigines lived in the area. It is also said that it was the Mimi who originally taught Aborigines how to paint.

Hundreds of hand, hand-and-arm and artifact stencils cover shelter walls and ceilings as well. Occasionally a foot stencil or a stenciled outline of an animal body part can also be found. Aborigines state that most stencils were done in order to record a visit to a site and to remember particular individuals. Stencils were done by men, women and children while most other forms of painting were done exclusively by men. Some stencils have been painted with clan designs and x-ray features, such as finger bones, to honor and remember particular deceased individuals and to help with the process of returning their spirits to ancestral clan wells.

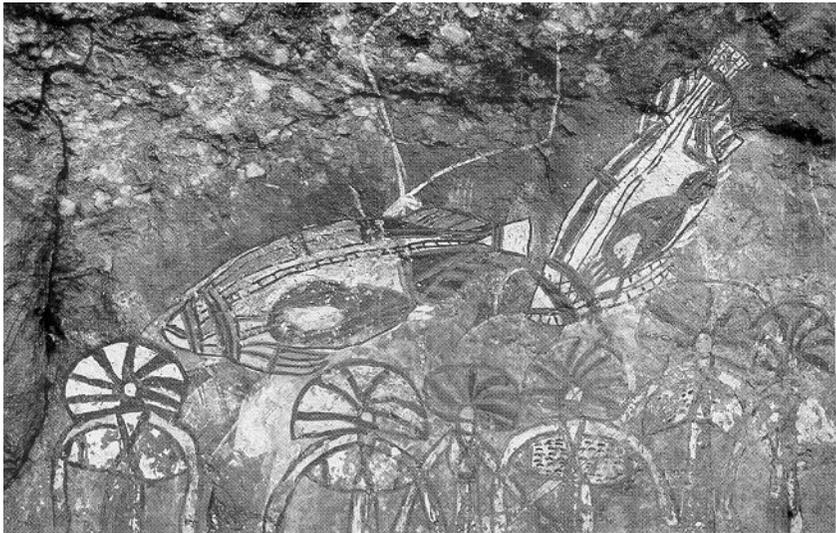
A variety of sacred symbols or marrayen designs were painted in some shelters, as were various geometric shapes, lines or patterns. Some stick figures, abstract designs or animal forms were also formed out of pressed beeswax (Figure 9). As well, beeswax sometimes was added to a painting composed of pigment to create a three-dimensional effect. Most beeswax works are of very recent origin but it is possible that earlier examples simply have not survived.

The arrival of Asians and Europeans to the north of Australia has been recorded in the art in great detail. Various ships, an airplane and men on horseback as well as solitary paintings of Europeans are scattered throughout the central and northern ends of the region. There are also hand-guns, shotguns and rifles, horses, cows, pigs, buffalo, goats and other introduced species.

There was a heavy toll on Aborigines in terms of disease, loss of land and loss of culture with the arrival of foreigners. Some of this is reflected in the art of the period with sorcery paintings and diseased human figures with swollen joints or long fingers being the most dramatic response. As sorcery was thought to have caused disease and misfortune it was often expressed or revenged through painting (Chaloupka, 1983:15).



**Figure 4:** An x-ray Magpie goose (*Anseranas semipalmata*) from the East Alligator River.



**Figure 5:** Two x-ray saratoga (*Sceleropages jardini*) painted at Nourlangie by Najombolmi in the late 1960's.

Although there was great upheaval in Western Arnhem Land in recent times this did not result in a total change or reorientation in the form and style of artistic expression. Change was merely incorporated into it so that earlier conventions persisted until recent years. As well, much of the inherent meaning and importance of the paintings has remained unaltered so that for many Aboriginal elders the rock art expresses a great deal about both contemporary and traditional life and belief.

The recent rock paintings of Western Arnhem Land have been analyzed in the last few years from both European and Aboriginal perspectives (Tacon, 1988d; 1989b). This has yielded a much more comprehensive classification system than those previously proposed by others. For instance, a formal analysis of the art based upon form and function has shown that the paintings can be divided into the following forms: full figures, stick figures, stencils, beeswax rows/figures and prints. Each of these forms was further subdivided into predominant types and the incidence of types was charted, compared and contrasted. Full figures were found to be the most significant and important for Aboriginal people with the x-ray type and solid/stroke infill mythical Beings most sacred. Some forms and types were found to have various levels of meaning associated with them; x-ray art has the most potential for this.

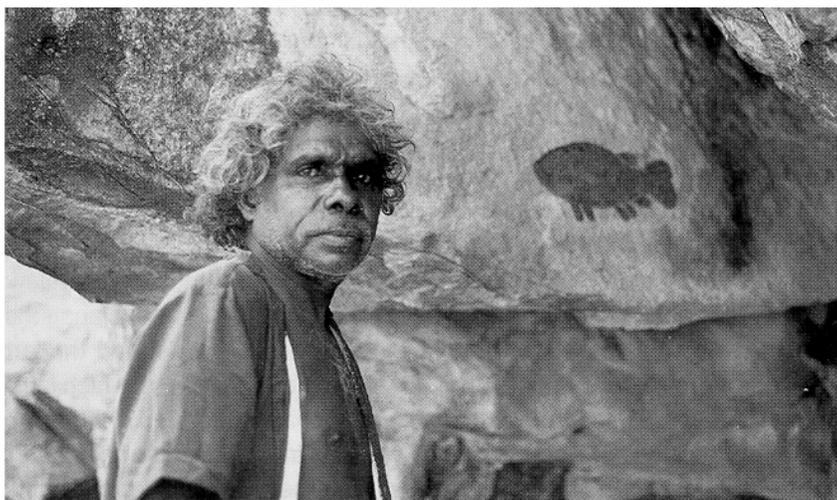
The results were then compared to Aboriginal categorizations based upon meaning. Aborigines classify the forms differently from a formal European approach but there is a significant degree of overlap. Although they did not always provide specific labels for their categories, names were chosen based upon Aboriginal concepts and meaning. The most powerful paintings have been labelled *Nayuyngi* ('sacred Being'); they are sacred in both the Aboriginal and European sense of the word. Most of these are depictions of powerful mythological Beings, such as the Rainbow Serpent (Figure 10), which are shown as full figures, usually with solid/stroke infill. It is often said that the creatures produced their images themselves during the Dreamtime. These images are intrinsically the most powerful and sacred in Western Arnhem Land.

The second most significant category has been labelled *Garre wakwami* or 'Dreaming' paintings. This category includes most full figures, some stick figures and some beeswax forms. X-ray paintings are the most significant. *Garre wakwami* paintings have both sacred and profane meanings but only initiated men are permitted to know the deeper, sacrosanct levels of meaning. Many of these relate to dreaming stories, dreaming law or belief.

The last three categories have been called *Mimi*, *Sorcery*, and *Casual*. They are not sacred in the European sense, but aspects of the former two do involve Aboriginal metaphysics and belief. *Mimi* paintings involve all older



**Figure 6:** An archer fish (*Toxotes chatareus*), barramundi, saratoga and black bream (*Hephaestus fuliginosus*) painted by Najombolmi in a shelter in Deaf Adder Gorge.

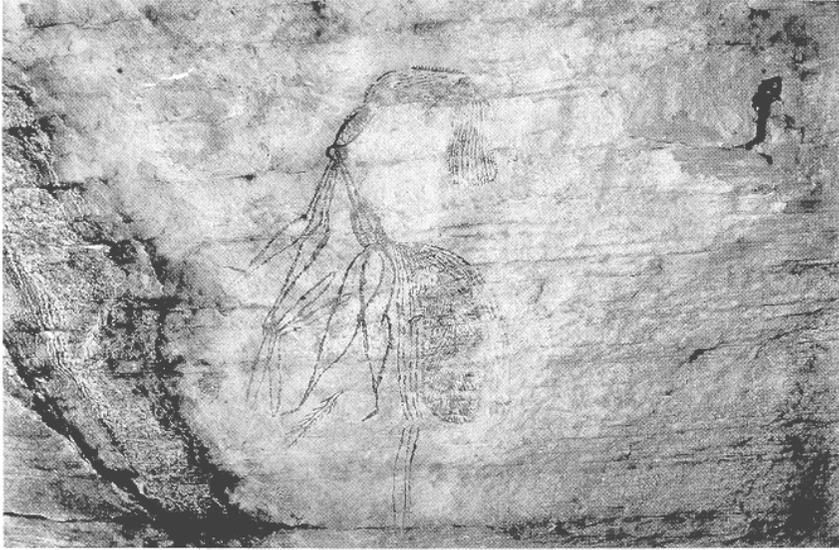


**Figure 7:** David Canari with a painting of a black bream produced in 1985 in Barramundi Gorge.

forms and styles, such as yam and dynamic figures, and some recent stick figures. Sorcery paintings are relatively rare; most have a full figure form but occasionally a stick figure form was used in the ritual action. Casual paintings include stencils, most recent stick figures and full figures of European subject matter.

Both forms of analysis have shown that paintings of Dreamtime full figure Rainbow Serpents (Figure 10), and the depictions of Dreaming x-ray fish (Figures 2, 3, 5 and 6) are the most significant in terms of meaning and intellectualization among traditional west Arnhem Land people. Artistic conventions have developed so that over a dozen individual species of fish, such as the Barramundi (Figure 2), Fork-Tail Catfish (Figure 3) and Saratoga (Figure 5), can be identified (Tacon, 1988b). Fish are related to the Rainbow and Rainbow Serpents through the colours exhibited in their skins while they are alive and are symbolic of the beginning of life. Often it is said that spirit-children resemble small fish when residing in ancestral clan wells (Tacon, 1989a; 1989b:278-279). Rainbow Snakes are symbolic of the end or re-beginning of life because of their creative-destructive power, skin shedding, and swallowing-regurgitation capabilities, behaviors observed in real snakes. In a sense fish and Rainbow Snakes can be placed at opposite ends of a spectrum of belief that describes the nature of Aboriginal existence. The spectrum is not straight, however, and instead arcs like a rainbow. Also like a rainbow, if one is powerful and knowledgeable enough to be able to visualize the whole picture, one finds that the spectrum defines a continuous cycle. Consequently, fish and Rainbow Serpents are at the opposite ends of the spectrum and are adjacent to one-another at the same time. Much of this has to do with the symbolic and metaphoric primacy of colour and texture (Tacon, 1989b:290-301).

Finally, it has been demonstrated that 'rainbowness' is associated with ancestral power or 'Dreamtime essence' (Tacon, 1989a; 1989b). It adds life to creatures and potency to paintings. It is symbolized by hatched, cross-hatched and solid bands of colour in paintings and is often the most abstract component of particular works. Its stylized form and metaphoric relationship to the colour of living flesh makes it ideally suited to explanations of abstract comments about the nature of life, death, spirits, and the larger Aboriginal universe. Its absence in some solid infill paintings, which lack internal features, indicates the depiction is of something dead. Furthermore, animate and inanimate objects which do not shine or have little colour (which are dull rather than bright) have less life force, spirituality or Dreamtime power/essence about them, according to Aborigines. The abstract nature of these infill designs associated with spirituality also functions to obscure



**Figure 8:** *A dynamic figure painting from Deaf Adder Gorge.*



**Figure 9:** *A beeswax composition depicting a European buffalo shooter and his prey, the Asian water buffalo introduced in the 1800's.*

meaning from the uninitiated and helps protect the control of knowledge and power shared by older men.

Most paintings of animals, including fish, were done after the hunt and not before. Very few were related to hunting magic. In this sense, and at their most superficial level, the animal paintings represent some of the food animals most sought after and caught by the Aboriginal hunters of the region. They would be recognized as such by all members of the group but they also could be used in a variety of other ways, to teach, explain, illustrate or pass on traditional belief and practice. In other words, they could be used for intellectualization among members of the community.

While all visual expression throughout Arnhem Land is closely related to myth and ritual, this is especially true of Western Arnhem Land rock paintings. Some of the animals depicted, for instance, also figured prominently in marrayen or other rituals, or in ancestral myths that relate how the landscape, people or other creatures were created, shaped or formed. At one large site with a few hundred paintings, this was particularly evident as many were found to illustrate more than one event, myth, practice or belief simultaneously. A group of different animals with x-ray features, for instance, was said to be depictions of animals caught by people who had lived there previously but also were grouped so as to illustrate a certain creation myth. By referring to the paintings and having them visually presented before oneself, one could more easily comprehend the myth and the meaning it was intended to convey.

At another level, the internal features and markings told how one should cut up and cook certain animals and then how the meat should be distributed. The features could also be used as a map to instruct youths about good places for hunting with some of the anatomical parts of the animals becoming analogous to geographical features of the landscape (Tacon, 1988a; 1988b; Taylor, 1987; 1989). As well, many other practical aspects of hunting and fishing could be conveyed to others by use of the paintings. Even laws and cultural traditions were explained by way of the art for additional impact.

At a much deeper level, some of the paintings were used to convey more secret and sacred information to the initiated. In this sense they are an expression of metaphysical belief and could be used to explain complex notions about life, death and reincarnation, and provide answers to questions for which all human groups the world over have searched. The art not only aided the discussion of complicated matters such as these but also was considered an expression of these matters and beliefs and increased the level of awareness among those who studied it. The very act of painting also reaffirmed ideas about the past, the Dreamtime and Aboriginal cultural tradi-

tions. Much of this is related to the very nature of x-ray art forms. For instance, the internal and external features of paintings are analogous to "inside" and "outside" meanings associated with both art forms and life itself.

### Changes in Art Production Over Time

X-ray art is generally less naturalistic than earlier forms of Western Arnhem Land rock art and is instead more stylized. This does not indicate that the artists were any less skilled but instead suggests that realism or naturalism became less useful in conveying certain types of meaning. The stylized form that developed persisted because of its capacity to symbolically and metaphorically express traditional ideas held by the artist and the communities that used it. The main reason for this is that abstraction inherently increases the potential range of reference. In the development of a simplified form with stylized internal features, less attention could be paid to specific naturalistic details while more could be paid to important symbolic features that convey a variety of associated meanings important to the artists and their audiences. One could conclude, therefore, that x-ray art, in being less naturalistic, has more potential for multiple levels of symbolism and meaning than earlier forms of art, such as dynamic figures or large naturalistic fauna.



**Figure 10:** *A female Rainbow Serpent with human features and two captured male initiates, Deaf Adder Gorge.*

Art production did not occur at a steady, constant rate over the past 18,000 years of the rock art continuum. Instead, it is highly probable that there were many outbursts of art production over time rather than a continuous, non-varying output. Two of the more prolific and significant periods are the "dynamic figure" period (Chaloupka, 1984) and the "freshwater, recent x-ray" period, although the "yam figure style/simple figures with boomerangs" period may also have been one of relatively high art production. The intervals between these periods, including that characterized by early x-ray paintings, were times of relatively little rock art production, as is evidenced by the frequency and distribution of Intervening styles and motifs (Chaloupka, 1983; Tacon, 1989b).

Ivan Haskovec (personal communication, 1986) suggests that the x-ray style began with the first use of polychrome or bichrome paintings. He argues that this commenced during the "Oenpelli figure" period (also known as "northern running figures" [Haskovec, 1988] and "Mountford figures") as all paintings in previous styles were depicted in one colour (for example, dynamic figures, large naturalistic fauna, yam figures, etc.). There are many surviving examples of Oenpelli figures painted in red-and-white or yellow-and-white and they appear to be the first polychromes. Associated with them are red-and-white abstract shapes which appear to be the remains of an early form of eel-tail catfish representation.

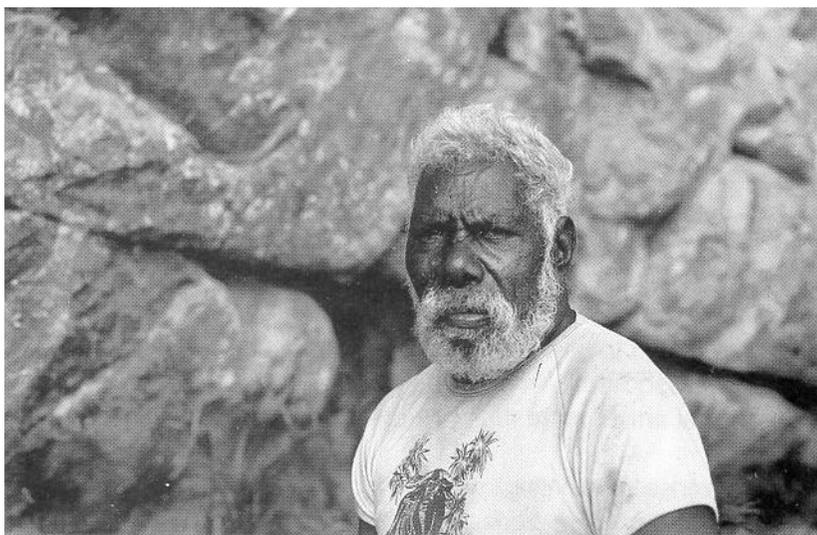
The use of more than one colour and the development of complex polychrome painting had a profound effect on the possible forms of art that could be produced by increasing the range. With polychromes there are more design options and one is able to produce images with increased complexity in patterning and infill. As has been argued previously (Tacon, 1987), aspects of "internalness" or "early x-ray" can be found in all styles of the area, including naturalistic, dynamic and yam paintings, but it is only in recent times that x-ray art reached its full elaboration, during the freshwater period of less than 3,000 years ago. This is also when polychrome art reached its full potential.

The great florescence of painting in the recent freshwater period may be related to an increase in food supply (especially fish), and more settled populations and intensification, as is reflected in the archaeological record (Tacon, 1989b). This was accompanied by a shift in religious orientation and the general belief system of Western Arnhem Land people, with the Rainbow Serpent receiving greater importance. This shift was apparently triggered by environmental change and resulting increased social discourse. There is no evidence to support the idea that recent x-ray art production was triggered or stimulated by outsiders, such as Macassans or Europeans.

### Contemporary Aboriginal Significance

One of the main complexes of rock art sites frequented by interstate and overseas tourists is Ubirr, located in the northeast of Kakadu National Park near the East Alligator River. Bill Neidjie (Figure 11), a Bunitj clan elder and traditional owner of the site, states that, like other art sites, Ubirr is very important and the paintings must not be touched or defaced by anyone. He says that when he visits the place it makes him think. It gives him "feelings" and it makes him think about his granny and grandfather. All the paintings and caves and shelters like these have a story and tell of the past. They are more important than "a Toyota or anything else" a young Aborigine might want. You might have an accident with a Toyota and it would be gone, whereas the paintings will always be there. They make you think and feel things when you come and look at them (Neidjie in Tacon, 1986:Tape 08).

On another occasion, at Nadambirr (Hawk Dreaming), Neidjie remarked paintings give one "feeling" and this makes you remember your granny and your auntie. He later elaborated by adding it also makes you think of "uncle or grandfather, grandad, kids, people, everybody that been go (to) that painting. I think about it and I think when we go look. We say "good paint-ing" and then he give you all that good feeling" (in Tacon, 1986:Tape 10).



**Figure 11:** *Bill Neidjie, a Bunitj clan elder from Cannon Hill.*

Neidjie then concluded:

Memories, he give you memories. You can't look (see them) but its there alright. Plenty people, "oh, lovely painting" they say. Yah lovely painting, but happy. That memory give you. And think about it. No matter we can look painting, but you'll have to think about it. Good thing, you know.

That paintings was there, but you can't touch 'em. They told us; they said don't touch it. My uncle, he told me. Don't touch any painting. I said "what for"? You'll know after. He read it. What for I said. People (will) be asking you, you'll get sick of it. "What people? Aborigine? White?" No matter what sort of people, they'll come ask you...That old man, he was right... He got good story, good memory, so he's happy.

We too much humbug, you know. All this drinking. They don't listen. No matter who. That's why they have, you know, bad luck sometimes. Dying. Because they don't understand this one (points to rock painting). This story; because this good, good one this story...People that walk away and don't listen at meetings get bad luck (in Tacon 1986:Tape 010; parentheses mine).

As can be seen in the above, and as has been outlined (Tacon 1988a; 1989a), rock painting and its relationship to other aspects of traditional West Arnhem Land culture has always been multifaceted and important. It has also been demonstrated that, at least for "x-ray" and related paintings created over the past few hundred years, it is still possible to obtain consistent traditional knowledge from living Aboriginal elders. Of course, the information is contemporary but many of the associated ideas and stories have changed only slightly this century, as can be demonstrated by comparisons with texts recorded between 1912 and 1986 (Tacon. 1988c; 1989b:231-274). As well, those ideas shared by a number of people over a large area, and which are also found in ethnographic texts written over the past seventy-five years, were found to be fundamental to the belief system (Tacon, 1988c). This core of associated knowledge should be closer to that held by some of the original artists more than just diverse interpretations of connected ideas.

In one sense the paintings serve as memory aids or signposts or jumping off points from where stories about the past, whether it be the recent or distant Dreamtime, may begin. Some paintings have very specific stories associated with them while others have more general, diffuse meanings and may spark many memories, ideas or associations. Most x-ray art falls into

the latter category, especially x-ray paintings of humans, animals or fish. It would seem that the design features found in these depictions are complex and intricate enough to convey a variety of signals which are grounded in the life experience of the viewer. The viewer response, therefore, is influenced by both past and present experience and some of the specific details may have more importance at different times depending upon the story being told, the context of the viewing situation, recent and not-so-recent events in the past of the individual and so forth. The paintings, therefore, also have an historic function in that they have recorded or embodied many aspects of traditional Aboriginal thought, metaphysics, economics and daily life, some of which is more-or-less accessible to many people today.

## Conclusion

With the development of polychrome painting techniques, coloured in-fill attained prominence as a way of metaphorically representing "life" or the "life-force" found within all living creatures. At the same time Aboriginal artists became much more interested in rainbows, fish and other things that shimmer with colour and life. Dullness became associated with death and those things that shimmer with colour, through a combination of hue, iridescence and optical effects, became symbolic of life and the renewal of life. With time this was incorporated into a complex belief system that highlights the relationship of Aborigines to other creatures and the forces of nature. This relationship is continually renewed through ritual, the recounting of myths and Dreamtime stories and the act of painting.

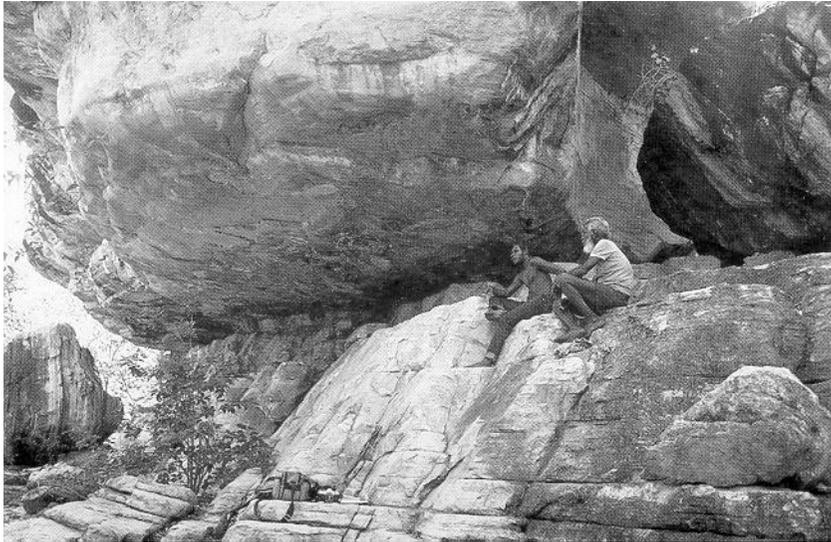
In West Arnhem Land, therefore, interest in the Rainbow Serpent, in fish as waterhole dwellers, quartz and other things that shimmer, as well as the particular painting technique, form a symbolic complex that is very much interrelated. In their rock art Aborigines used fine white, red and yellow lines to illuminate their art and show something that resembles fish scales, python skins, rainbows and Rainbow Snakes, quartz crystals and so forth. This effect is what gives recent paintings potency and links them to the ancestors and more ancient images of the Dreamtime past. This effort to symbolize "brightness" and the spirit/soul of creatures was made possible by an increase in the numbers and combinations of hues employed in particular rock paintings. As well, an increased concern with internal features for some types of painting changed the form to one with less emphasis on naturalism and more on stylization. With *Nayuyngi*, or "Sacred Being" paintings, those of the Rainbow Serpent were most revered. They developed into a symbol of creation, destruction and nature itself. Paintings of fish became the most important *Garre wakwami* paintings and came to symbolize both the source

and sustainer of human life. Because of their colour, Rainbow Snakes and x-ray fish were adopted as shimmering symbols of light and life, as were their natural equivalents.

With time many things proceed from brilliant to dull, and an understanding of this process, and its opposite, are integral to comprehending Aboriginal metaphysics and visual art in both Eastern and Western Arnhem Land (Morphy, 1986; Tacon 1989a). The biotic landscape that brightens with life during the wet season, for instance, dries and dulls through the late dry season. Rainbows fade from the sky and leave a grey hue behind. People grow old and die; when death strikes the skin pales and loses its brilliance. Animals, including fish and snakes, lose their rainbow colour and change to a dull, washed out pallor. Finally, elements of culture, such as paintings, also fade or become washed out as a consequence of being exposed to the elements.

The cycle is not closed, however, as everything that becomes dull will be brightened, renewed and reborn once more. The landscape, for instance, regenerates with the arrival of each wet season, and rainbows reappear in the sky during the Aboriginal season of *Gunumeleng* (October to December). The souls of people are returned to the water-dwelling, spirit-child phase of existence through ritual and through the action of painting the bones of the deceased with red ochre. The souls of animals are recycled and returned to ancestral wells with the wet season rains and various rituals. Aborigines both mirrored and participated in this process by tapping into the power of the original Dreamtime Beings. One of the ways in which they did this was by painting some creatures with brilliant rainbow colour on shelter walls and ceilings (Figure 12).

This is one of the reasons particular pieces were repainted or superimposed with new paintings. The retouching and repainting changed the shelter art back from dull to brilliant and allowed Aborigines to make contact with the continuing cycle of spiritual and physical existence. In the process it reaffirmed the Aboriginal past and present for the artists and their extended families. It also helped ground them in both time and space. By adding internal features and solid, hatched and, especially, cross-hatched infill, Aborigines added "life" to paintings and tapped into the colour and power of life within their universe. Through painting, as well as myth and ritual, Aboriginal creativity became united with natural creativity and Aborigines intensified their links and bonds with the larger natural and supernatural world.



**Figure 12:** *Alex and Bobby Nganjmirra at Injuluk, Oenpelli.*

## NOTES

1. This paper has resulted from research conducted between 1985 and 1989 for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Australian National University, Canberra. It was supported with grants from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies and the Faculty of Arts, Australian National University. Permission was obtained from the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, the Gagudju Association and the Northern Land Council. All of the many people who have generously contributed to the research in one form or another are thanked. George Chaloupka, Northern Territory Museum of Arts and Sciences, Darwin, and Andree Rosenfeld, Australian National University, are especially thanked. As well, David Canari, Toby Gangale, Nipper Kapirigi, George Namingum, Bill Neidjie and other Aboriginal people from Kakadu and Oenpelli are given special thanks for teaching me so much about art and life.

All photographs and drawings are by the author.

- Contemporary Kunwinjku people east of the study area hold the opposite view (Taylor, 1987; 1989:12), and argue that x-ray paintings show cooked creatures while solid or stroke infill images are "raw" or living beings, but the larger system operates in much the same way. This is one of the ways they distinguish themselves from their neighbors, however (see Maddock, 1976 for others).

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### LIST OF FIGURES

1. The location of the study area within Western Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia.
2. An x-ray barramundi, (*Lates calcarifer*) painted early this century and one of hundreds of paintings on the walls of Yuwenjgayay, Deaf Adder Gorge.
3. X-ray barramundi, fork-tail catfish (*Hexanematchthys leptaspis*) and other species cover the walls and ceilings of many shelters at Ubirr, one of the main sites frequented by tourists.
4. An x-ray Magpie goose (*Anseranas semipalmata*) from the East Alligator River. This species is found only in the art of the recent fresh-water period that began 3,000 years ago.
5. Two x-ray saratoga (*Sceleropages jardini*) painted at Nourlangie by Najombolmi in the late 1960's.
6. An archer fish (*Toxotes chatareus*), barramundi, saratoga and black bream (*Hephaestus fuliginosus*) painted by Najombolmi in a shelter in Deaf Adder Gorge.
7. David Canari, cousin (father's brother's son) to Najombolmi, with a painting of a black bream produced in 1985 in Barramundi Gorge.
8. A dynamic figure painting from Deaf Adder Gorge. Paintings of this style are thought to be at least 10,000 years of age and are said to have been made by *Mimi* spirits before the arrival of the ancestors of contemporary Aborigines.
9. A beeswax composition depicting a European buffalo shooter and his prey, the Asian water buffalo introduced in the 1800's.

10. A female Rainbow Serpent with human features and two captured male initiates, Deaf Adder Gorge. This powerful Being is said to have placed its image on the sandstone ceiling itself in the Dreamtime.
11. Bill Neidjie, a Bunitj clan elder from Cannon Hill. Neidjie witnessed the production of many paintings in his youth and camped with relatives in some of the shelters at Ubirr and others to the north. He is currently employed as a Park Ranger and is very much concerned with passing on knowledge about the rock art to future generations.
12. Alex and Bobby Nganjmirra at Injuluk, Oenpelli. This shelter contains one of the largest galleries in the region with many pieces having been produced this century. Bobby Nganjmirra is a renowned bark painter and painted at the site in the 1940's and 1980's.