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20

KAKADU DREAMING: ANCESTRAL BEINGS AND MYTHOLOGY IN THE ROCK ART OF THE KAKADU REGION

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Abstract. In Aboriginal mythology, Ancestral Beings created the landforms, plants, animals, and people, and travelled along 'Dreaming Paths', at a time known as 'The Dreamtime'. Many rock paintings in the Kakadu region relate to these Ancestral Beings, also known as 'Dreamtime Spirits' or 'Creator Figures'. In the Kakadu region, the present day Aborigines still have knowledge of the myths associated with some of these Ancestral Heroes, and can identify the relevant paintings with a Creator Figure, and its Dreaming Path. However, looking at the oldest rock paintings, there is often no Aboriginal knowledge or understanding about them. This paper explores methods of studying some of these older paintings in the Kakadu Region, in terms of their possible religious significance.

In this paper, two Dreaming Paths and several mythological figures which currently have great significance to the Aborigines of Kakadu will be described. It will be shown that mythology associated with some of these Ancestral Beings may not be older than the X-ray Style of rock art, while an association with other Beings is probably much older. Next, it will be shown that the images of the Rainbow Serpent in the rock art of the region have changed over a long period of time. Finally, some observations about the older paintings will be made, with reference to their possible religious content.

Previous studies of Kakadu rock art by Mountford (1956), Brandl (1973), Chaloupka (1977, 1984) and Lewis (1988) have outlined a relative sequence of art styles and methods by which the rock art can be dated approximately.

ANCESTRAL BEINGS

Some Ancestral Beings appear in the rock art only in the later X-ray Style. These are the 'Cockatoo Lady' (Nardarmbul), the male creator of the Cannon Hill area (Indjuwanydjuwa), and the 'Lightning Man' (Namarrgon). The 'Rainbow Serpent' appears in the art from the period of the 'Yam Figures Style' onwards. As Chaloupka has stated (1984: 41), the Rainbow Serpent and associated mythology is probably the longest continuing religious belief in the world.

The Cockatoo Lady, Nardarmbul

According to Big Bill Neidjie (personal communication), an Aboriginal elder who lives at Cannon Hill (Figure 1), Nardarmbul, who he also calls the 'White Lady' or 'Cockatoo Lady', came to the Cannon Hill area and put her image on Hawk Dreaming Outlier, then travelled three kilometres south to Ubirr (Obiri Rock) where she became the Rainbow Serpent. She then travelled on to form a land form called 'Ngarradj Warde Djobkeng' (Cockatoo Split Rock), another eight kilometres south of Ubirr. The myth of the Cockatoo Lady is

interesting in that it joins with the Rainbow Serpent myth and illustrates how complex Rainbow Serpent mythology can be. In this case, the Cockatoo Lady not only turns into a serpent which then does other things, but also continues on as herself or a cockatoo.

The only images of her in the Kakadu rock art known to the author are at Hawk Dreaming (Figure 2a) and at Ubirr (Figure 2b). Both these paintings appear to be of recent origin (within the last few hundred years), and thus the Aboriginal mythology associated with this Ancestral Being may be of recent origin, too. Both these figures were recorded by Mountford (1956: 172), but he recorded no information about the paintings and made no connection between the two. He also omitted the 'beak' on the 'lady' (it may have flaked off), although it was present later (Welch 1982: 53, photographed 1979). The painting was retouched by Bill Neidjie and Felix Holmes, both Aborigines with traditional affiliation, in the early 1980s. In 1979 the 'beak' was pointing to the left side of the 'body' and no 'eyes' were shown. When the painting was retouched in the early 1980s, the two 'eyes' were placed on the front of the 'face' as seen in Figure 2a and the 'beak' was painted to the left still. However, later, Bill Neidjie was unhappy with this appearance of Nardarmbul and washed away some of the 'face'.

Indjuwanydjuwa

Another figure of possible recent origin is Indjuwanydjuwa, a Dreamtime figure who came from the east and created the landforms around the Cannon Hill area, according to the Aboriginal custodian, Big Bill Neidjie (cf. Davis 1982). He is depicted in several rockshelters in that region and is also present in the form of a rock in a small lagoon in the Cannon Hill area. He is said to have taught the Aborigines many things. On top of Hawk Dreaming are stone arrangements (Welch 1982: 84) and, according to Bill Neidjie (personal communication), some of these piles of stones represent piles of fish that Indjuwanydjuwa left for Aborigines in the Dreamtime, while some linear arrangements are in shapes of fish.

The paintings shown in Figures 3b and 3c have been

identified by Neidjie as portraying Indjuwanydjuwa. They are similar in appearance, painted in a thick layer of pigment, showing a fat 'person', whose 'eyes' are painted black. Both figures were repainted by Neidjie at the same time that he repainted Nardarnbul. There are other, older paintings of single large 'males' in the area, looking similar to these representations of Indjuwanydjuwa. However, according to Neidjie, they are not.

The Lightning Man, Namarrgon

Paintings of the 'Lightning Man' are identified by the Kakadu Aborigines as having a 'male' figure, often with large 'penis', surrounded by a line which represents 'lightning' and having 'stone axes' attached to his 'head', 'knees', and 'elbows'. These 'axes' are used to produce the thunder. He is painted in the famous Anbangbang shelter on Nourlangie Rock (Welch 1982: 73), also at Cadell River (Brandl 1973: 63), at Mount Borraddille (Figure 4), and at several sites in Deaf Adder Valley (Brandl 1973: 62). Huge cliffs, known as 'Lightning Dreaming', mark the place in the Arnhem Land Escarpment where he emerged from the Arnhem Land plateau in the Dreamtime. There have been no paintings older than the X-ray Style found which depict him in this form. His presence in Aboriginal mythology is therefore presumed to be only as old as the X-ray Style.

As he disappears from the mythology of the Aborigines further south, a new figure emerges with a similar name, and also a creator of lightning, although with different associated mythology. This is Nargorkun, also known as 'Bulademo' or 'Bula'.

Nargorkun

Arndt recorded details of this Ancestral Being in the 1950s and 1960s. Nargorkun and his two wives, the Narlinji (-linji), created the earth and its inhabitants in the Dreamtime, and one of his minor roles was as the creator of lightning (Arndt 1962: 304).

Paintings of Nargorkun usually show him with a large 'headdress', holding a 'stone axe', and having lines on his body which represent 'initiation scars', and a large 'circumcised penis' (Arndt 1962). All paintings of Nargorkun identified by Aborigines are in the recent polychrome X-ray Style and made using thick pigments. These are found in Jawoyn (Djauan) territory from Gunlom (Waterfall Creek Falls, also known as U.D.P Falls) south toward Katherine. The Aborigines now use the name 'Bula' in place of 'Nargorkun', which they now say means only 'a good hunter' (R. G. Gunn, personal communication).

One wonders whether the mythology associated with both Namarrgon and Nargorkun had common origins hundreds of years ago. There are other Ancestral Being connected with lightning and rain in northern Australia. These are the 'Lightning Brothers' in the Victoria River District and the Wandjina paintings of the Kimberley. To this date, none of these Ancestral Heroes associated with lightning and rain have been found painted in the rock art of their respective regions in earlier monochrome red ochre styles. It is very likely that these mythological stories started at a time after polychrome techniques and X-ray Style of painting had begun. Possibly new religious beliefs coincided with new painting techniques in one big cultural revolution!

The Rainbow Serpent

This Ancestral Hero is well documented throughout much of Australia as being part of contemporary Aboriginal belief. In the Kakadu region, there are many paintings identified by Aborigines as being those of the 'Rainbow Serpent'. However, in this case the paintings range from the present back to the early monochrome red ochre styles of possibly thousands of years ago.

The features of the Rainbow Serpent seen in these paintings are not consistent as one moves from the oldest to the newest art. We have no way of knowing what Aboriginal people thought of the Rainbow Serpent thousands of years ago, but by looking at the paintings one gets the definite impression that there has been an evolution in the mythological beliefs associated with this Ancestral Being. This is interpreted as follows:

1. In the Large Naturalistic Style, isolated paintings of 'snakes' appear. These are among the oldest paintings in the area, and show no evidence of anthropomorphism or other distortion. In the 'Dynamic Figure Style' there is one example known (Brandl 1973: 47; Lewis 1988: 191) of 'humans' surrounding a long, natural-looking 'snake'. However, the 'snake' has an obvious attachment at the 'neck', and for this reason Aborigines thought that this early painting may have represented a ritual and the first image of the 'Rainbow Serpent' (Brandl 1973: 181).
2. In the Yam Figure Style period, the paintings of 'Rainbow Serpent' with 'kangaroo head' emerge (Figure 5) usually associated with either 'yam figures', 'yam strings', the segmented circle motif ('yam oven?'), or with 'flying fox' figures (Brandl 1973: 68, 76-7; Chaloupka 1984: 39; Lewis 1988: 271-81).
3. The images of the 'Rainbow Serpent' change dramatically in the X-ray Style period. Four aspects of change are: (a) In 'head' portrayal, there is an appearance of a 'cockatoo', 'yam', 'crocodile', and 'human head' (Figures 2b, 6, 7 and 8). (b) The sex of the 'Rainbow Serpent' emerges in the 'X-ray Period'. Figure 6 shows a 'female' 'Rainbow Serpent' painted over an incipient X-ray 'turtle'. By the time of complex 'X-ray Style', the 'Rainbow Serpent' has become bisexual in some of its depictions (Figure 8). Brandl also illustrated another bisexual, but humanoid 'Rainbow Serpent' (1973: 70, 181). (c) The 'body' shape in the 'Yam Period' may be snake-, yam- or crocodile-like. These types continue in the 'X-ray Period', but further variations are added such as 'rainbow' shape (Mountford 1956: 215; Welch 1982: 63), 'beard', 'emu' 'breasts' (Brandl, 1973: 69, 181), and anthropomorphous figures (Brandl 1973: 70). In the bark paintings produced this century, the 'Rainbow Serpent' often has 'lily' attachments as well. (d) Associated motifs: no painting of a 'Rainbow Serpent' in the X-ray Style period is known to have associated motifs surrounding it such as exists in the Yam Figure Style period.

The Two Sisters

In Aboriginal mythology, there are several legends which involve two women as creators or associated with Ancestral Creators in the Dreamtime, near and in the Kakadu Region (Berndt 1981: 252). These include the 'Djanggalawul Sisters' in north-eastern Arnhem Land (who are associated with their brother as creators), and the

'Wawalag (or Wagilag) Sisters' of northern Arnhem Land; both sets travelled east to west, but not as far as the Kakadu region. These are illustrated in many of the bark paintings of Arnhem Land. In the Kakadu region, there are 'Warramurrundji' (or 'Waramurungundju') in the north and the 'Narlinji-linji' and 'Narkundee-undee' mythology in the south.

Warramurrundji is a myth belonging to the people of the Oenpelli and Cannon Hill areas (Berndt 1981: 252; Davis 1982). She is sometimes one, sometimes two women, and is associated with a single male, Wuragag, represented as Tor Rock. There are many versions of the story, but in most of these, she came in the very beginning of time and created many of the Aboriginal tribes, plants, and animals, and helped form the landscape. Warramurrundji is also known as the 'Fertility Mother' or simply as 'The Mother'. Big Bill Neidjie stated (personal communication) that in the form of two women, she travelled toward Darwin, and crossed rivers on a bark canoe, which is illustrated in a painting on Hawk Dreaming (Figure 9).

The Narlinji-linji is the name of the two wives of Nargorkun (Bula) and the Narkundee-undee are the 'Sickness Sisters' who taught the Jawoyn (Djauan) people further south (Arndt 1962: 304-5). Aboriginal informants explained to Arndt that both sets of women often had their arms raised, and this is shown in many of the paintings that he illustrated. All paintings that have been identified by Aboriginal informants as being associated with these stories appear to be of recent origin, and are in 'Complex X-ray Styles' and polychromatic paintings. However, Figure 10 shows a depiction of two 'women' with the characteristically raised 'arms' in an older monochrome, incipient X-ray style. So it is possible that all or part of this mythology may date back several thousand years.

Between these two areas of the Warramurrundji and the Narlinji-linji beliefs there are other distinct paintings of sets of two 'women', with characteristics that make them stand out from the general body of secular art. On a rock face on top of Djerlandjal Rock, beside the Mount Brockman Massif, two 'women' are painted in faded red ochre, upside-down and holding 'hands' (Figure 11). Further south, and east of Gunlom (Waterfall Creek Falls), on another prominent hill, two inverted 'women' exist (Figure 12), but appearing more recent than those in Figure 11. The author has no Aboriginal information about these paintings, but they are shown here as a possible connection between the other beliefs.

Given the fact that there are a series of Aboriginal stories involving two women as creators across Arnhem Land and the Kakadu region, one may ask if they have evolved from a single, common story. The author has explored this possibility by looking for evidence in the rock art of the region. However, unlike the Rainbow Serpent mythology which can be easily traced in the rock art back thousands of years, so far there has not been the same evidence found in the case of the Two Women motif. There are several ancient paintings of a single 'male' and two 'females', but one has no way of knowing whether they represented Ancestral Beings or simply any man and his wives.

Kangaroo Men and Flying Fox Men

'Kangaroo Men' and 'Flying Fox Men' appear in the Dynamic Figure Style, as small figures, often running with 'spears' and 'boomerangs' beside the larger 'human'

Dynamic Figure Style figures (Figure 13). Other 'animal-headed' figures in this style have 'flying fox' 'bodies', and yet others have unusually shaped 'heads' or 'bodies'. The flying fox and kangaroo have very similar shaped heads, and in many of these paintings there is no way to know for certain if these figures are 'Kangaroo Men' or 'Flying Fox Men' or some of each. Brandl called them the former (1973: 172), but Chaloupka (personal communication) considers they may all be 'Flying Fox Men'. These 'animal-headed' 'humans' continue into later art styles, and are seen with 'spearthrowers' (Brandl 1973: 49; Welch 1982: 24).

Kangaroo Men are part of the 'Ubar' ritual in western Arnhem Land in recorded times (Berndt 1981: 267), but there is no ethnographic evidence to connect these older paintings with any present-day beliefs. The author simply wishes to illustrate that such human/animal transformations have occurred regularly in the rock art from as early as the 'Dynamic Figure Style'.

Animal Ancestral Beings

Some 'animals' depicted may represent, in fact, ancestral creator beings. For example, there is a major Dreamtime pathway for a creator couple, the male and female Antilopine Kangaroo (Chaloupka, personal communication). These Ancestral Beings may have existed since the time of the 'Large Naturalistic Animal Style' and may, in fact, be older than the Rainbow Serpent belief. This is suggested because there are paintings of a 'male' and 'female kangaroo' in the Large Naturalistic Style which Chaloupka (personal communication) has been told by Aboriginal informants represent these Ancestral Beings. It could simply be that Aborigines have interpreted early art into modern cosmology. However, when one closely examines these paintings, it is realised that they have prominent positioning and that they represent more of the rare examples of repainting and retouching in the Kakadu region. The reason for repainting and retouching is often because of a special significance to the Aborigines. One such painting from the Mount Brockman Massif is shown as Figure 14. This painting is in red ochre, and has not been painted over by other designs, although nearby shelters contain extensive artwork and overpainting. These figures are life size and prominently placed in a large shelter which overlooks a valley. The two 'kangaroos' have been repainted several times in red ochre and outlined finely in white pigment.

Another painting of the 'Ancestral Antilopine Kangaroos' about which Aboriginal informants have told Chaloupka (personal communication) is illustrated by Welch (1982: 34); this is also an early red ochre style painting retouched in red, and later outlined in white. Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing whether this kangaroo mythology was once an integral part of mythology associated with the Kangaroo Men and the Kangaroo-headed Rainbow Serpent.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to explore briefly a wide range of Kakadu rock art with reference to the subjects of mythology and religion. There is room in the future for more detailed research and analysis in each aspect of the art that has been discussed here.

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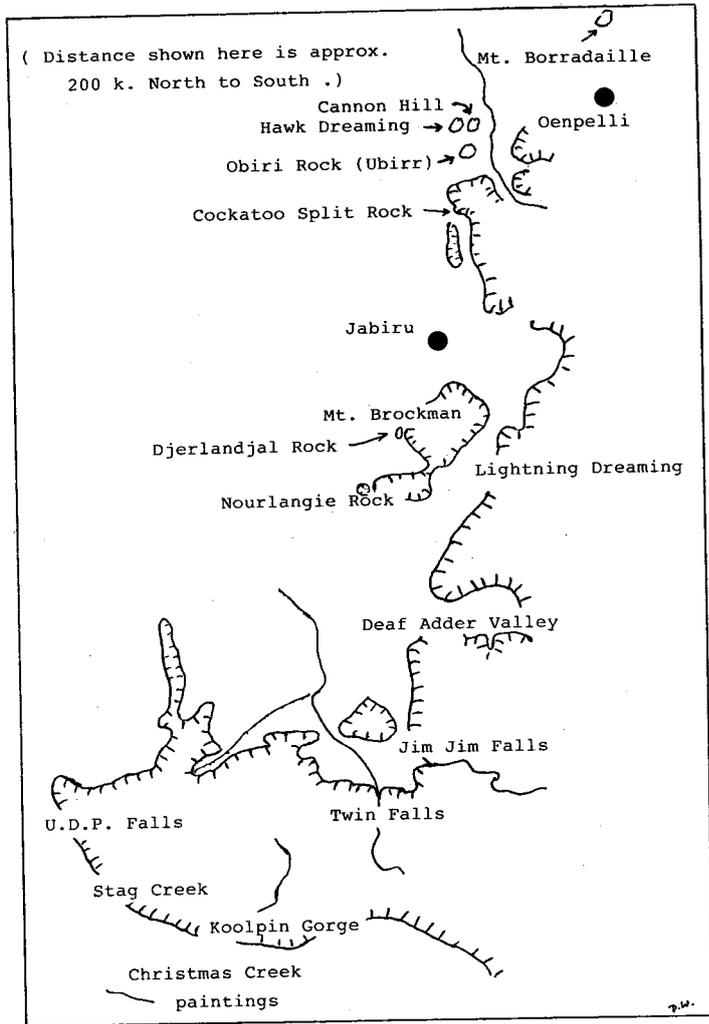


Figure 1. The Kakadu region.

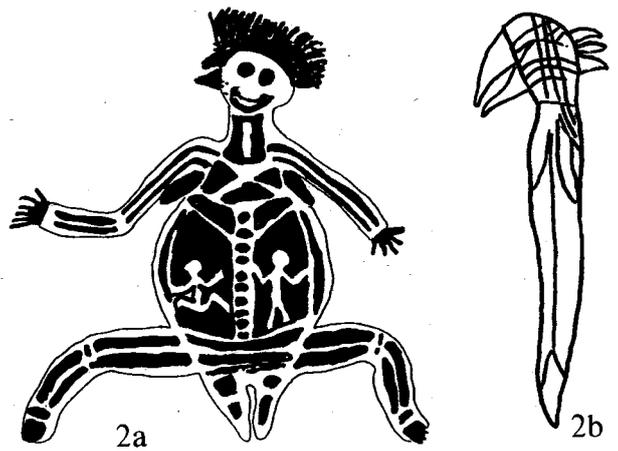


Figure 2a. Nardarbul after being repainted in white, red and with black eyes (60 cm).

Figure 2b. Nardarbul as the serpent, Ubirr (c. 50 cm).

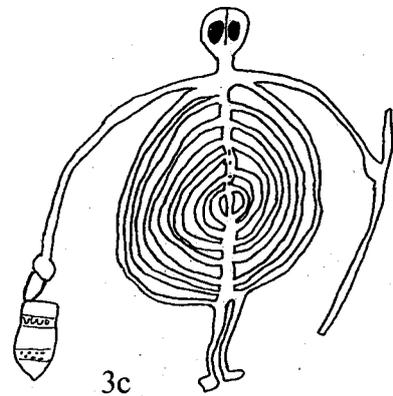
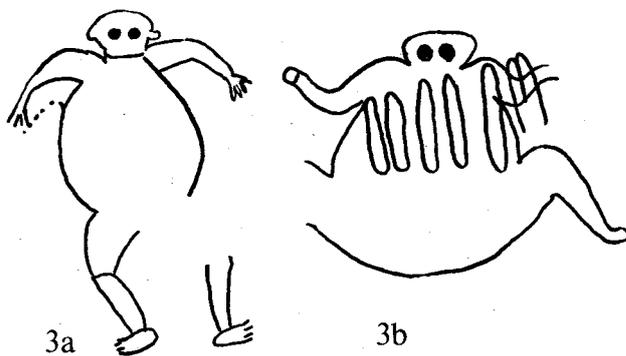


Figure 3a. Indjuwanydjuwa portrayed at Hawk Dreaming; white with black outline, black eyes (145 cm).

Figure 3b. Indjuwanydjuwa portrayed at Sorcery Rocks opposite Cannon Hill; red, yellow outline and white, black eyes (150 cm).

Figure 3c. Indjuwanydjuwa portrayed in Cockatoo Woman Cave at Hawk Dreaming; white, yellow and red, black eyes (1 m).



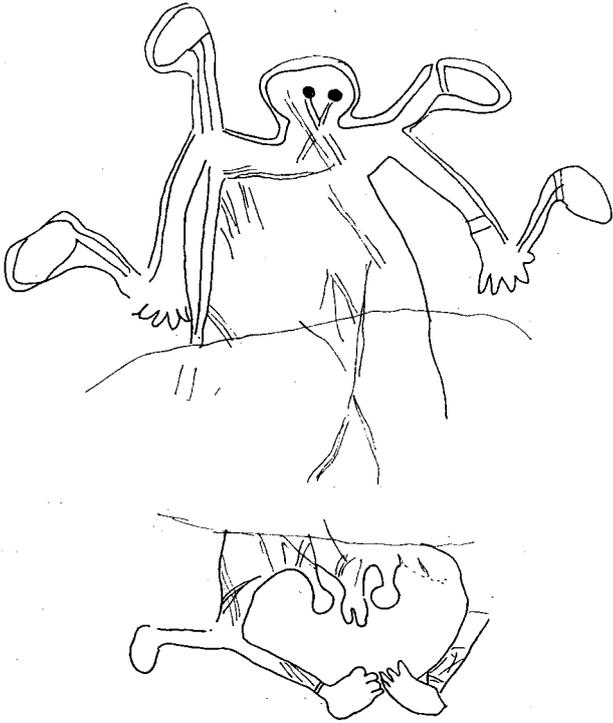


Figure 4. The Lightning Man, Mount Borraddille area; white and orange pigments (1.3 m).



Figure 5. Early form of Rainbow Serpent, Djerlandjal Rock (40 cm).



Figure 7. Yam-headed serpent, East Alligator; fresh orange pigment (1.5 m).



Figure 6. Female Rainbow Serpent, Deaf Adder Valley; faded red ochre (87 cm).

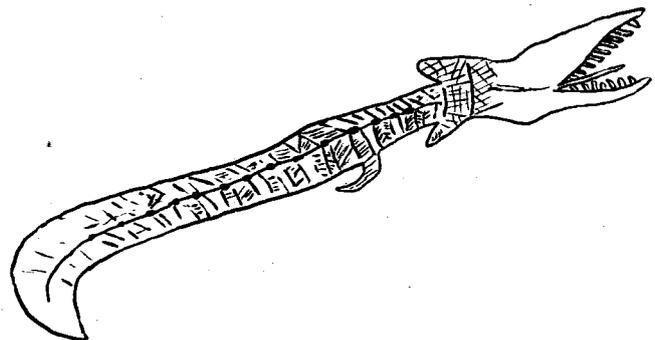


Figure 8. A crocodile-headed, bisexual Rainbow Serpent, Mount Borraddille (6.86 m).

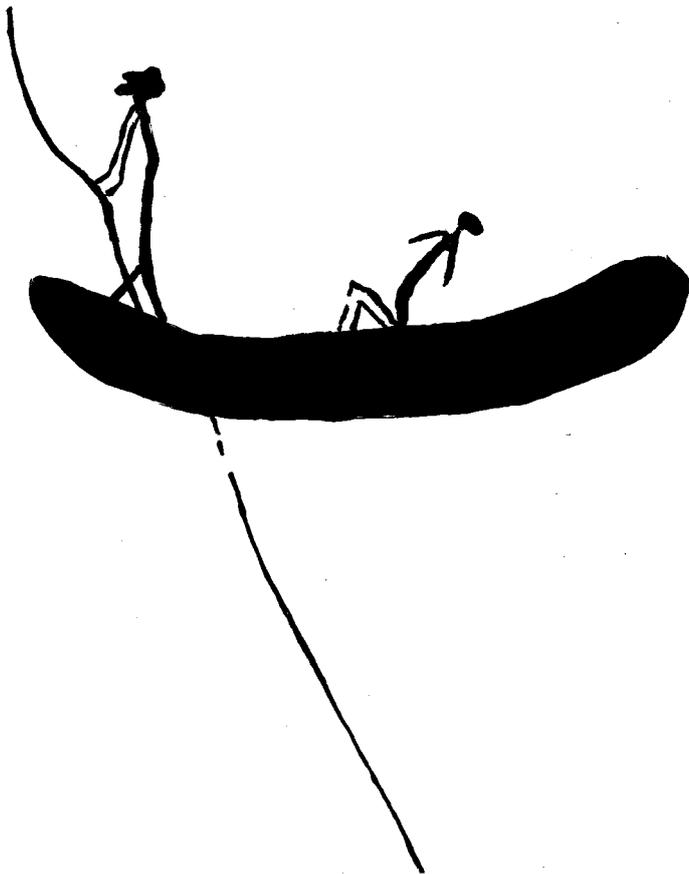


Figure 9. Image, Hawk Dreaming; orange-red ochre (20 cm).

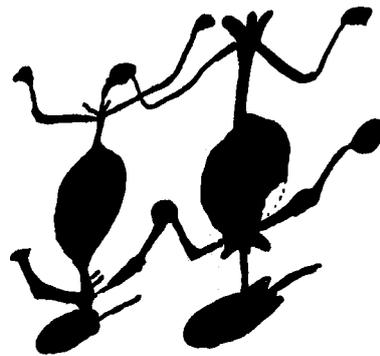


Figure 11. Two females holding hands, Djerlandjal Rock (c. 1 m tall).

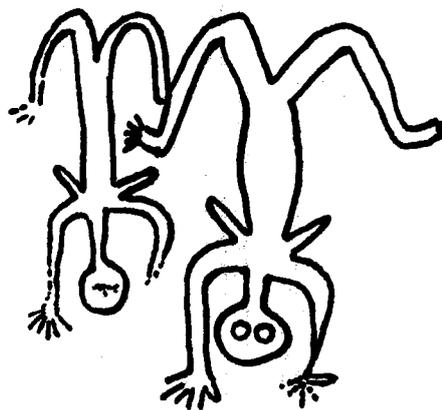


Figure 12. Two inverted women; brown and white (c. 1 m tall).

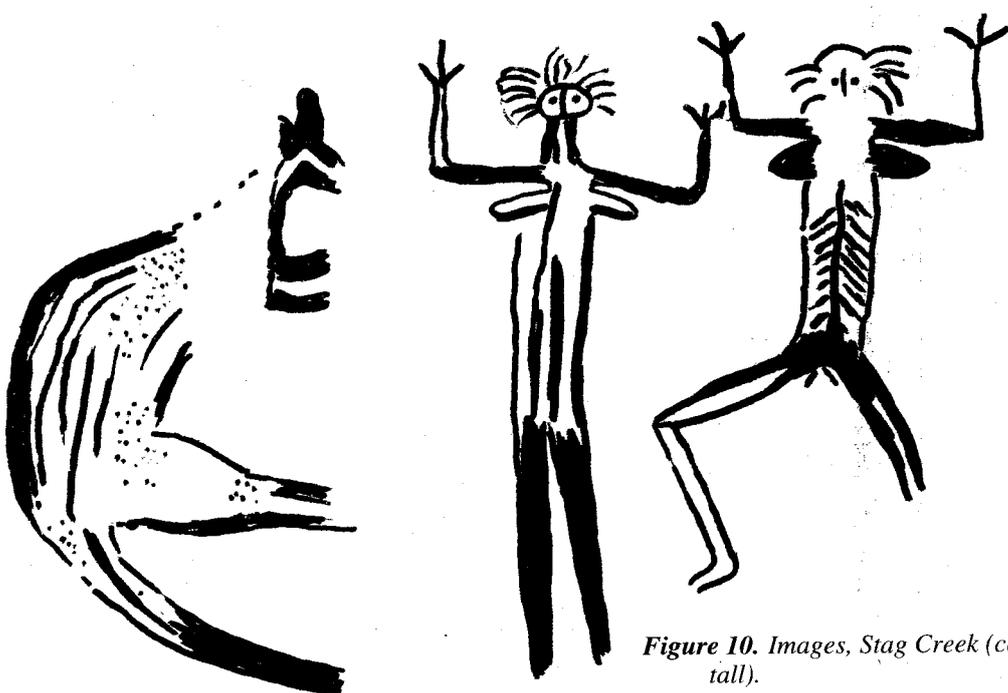


Figure 10. Images, Stag Creek (central figure 1.05 m tall).

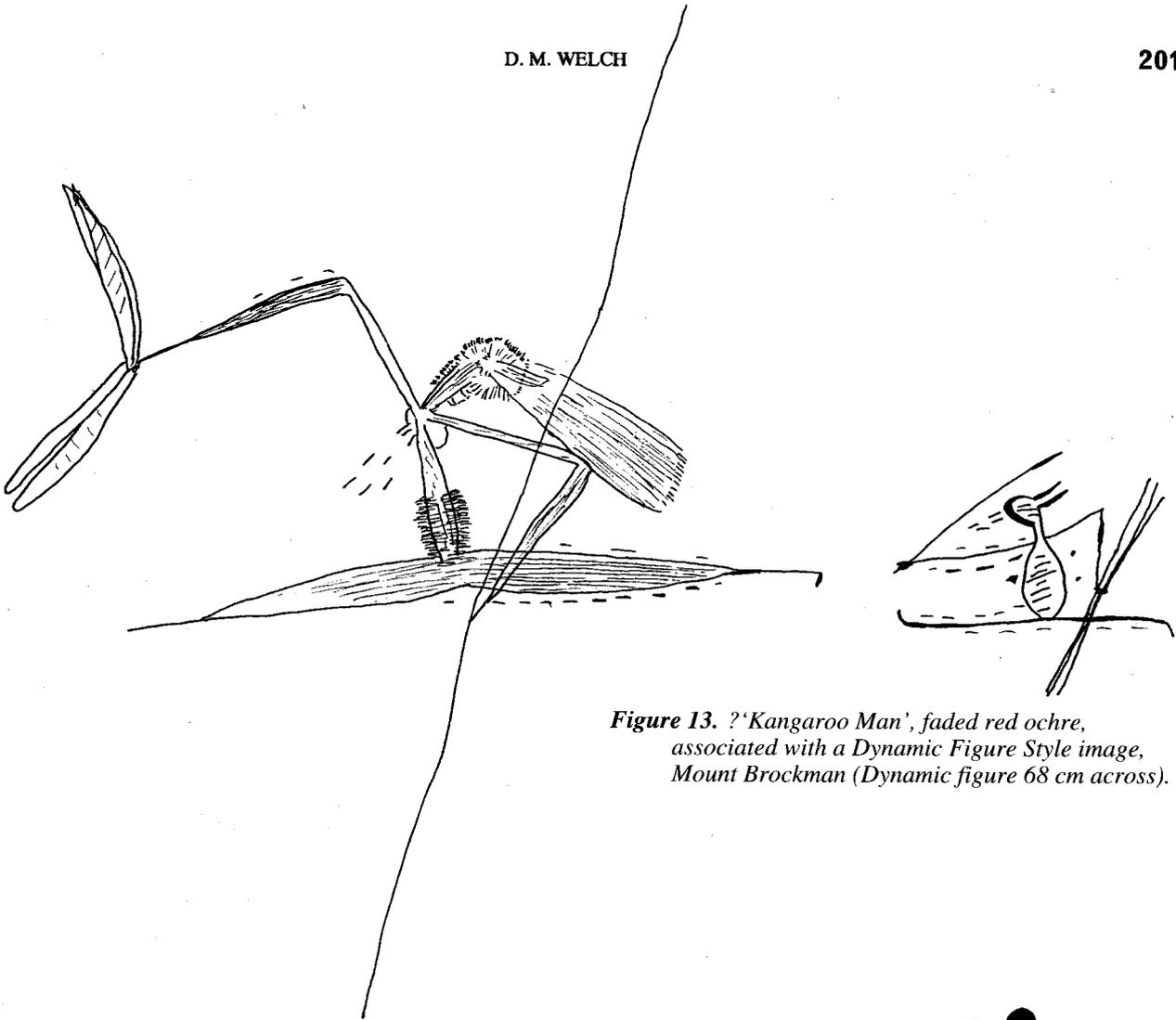


Figure 13. ?'Kangaroo Man', faded red ochre, associated with a Dynamic Figure Style image, Mount Brockman (Dynamic figure 68 cm across).



Figure 14. The male and female Antilopine Kangaroo Ancestral Heroes, Mount Brockman Massif; repainted several times in red ochre, outlined finely in white (left figure 2.24 m).