

# BCSP 31-32

## GRAFISMO E SEMIOTICA

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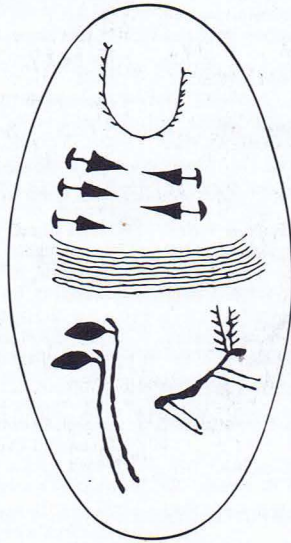
*Naquane, Valcamonica, Grande Roccia. Spirale che racchiude all'interno un'immagine oculiforme. (Archivio WARA).*

*In copertina:*

*Fenomeno di eccezionale interesse è la presenza nella zona di Kimberley, nel nord dell'Australia, di pitture rupestri che rappresentano esseri umani agghindati, abbigliati e adornati che risalgono ad alcune migliaia di anni addietro, in un'area dove fino al recente contatto con gli Europei gli aborigeni vivevano nudi. (Foto: D. Welch).*

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# OCEANIA



*Fig. 140. Rock art in the Kimberley, in North West Australia, display anthropomorphic beings with clothing and body decorations going back thousands of years. This fact is particularly astonishing in consideration of the fact that before the recent contact with Europeans the Aborigines of these territories were completely naked and did not use any clothing. The central figure seems to have a braid of hair which would be difficult to make with the hair of present day aborigines. The central figure is 1.25 metres high. (Photo by D. Welch).*



## CULTURAL CHANGE IN THE KIMBERLEY ROCK ART, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

David M. WELCH

### *Abstract*

The Kimberley region of north-western Australia has rock art revealing evidence of gradual changes in the culture of the Aborigines of that region over time. Human figures depicted in ceremonial dress and shown in dancing pose make up a large portion of the earlier art that survives. Some of these figures are associated with items of material culture no longer found in the area, yet surviving amongst Aboriginal tribes in other parts of Australia. There are changes in the content of ceremonial dances depicted. The rock art also reveals a previously important Plant People cult, and the gradual change to the Wandjina cult of faces without mouths.

### *Introduction*

The Kimberley Region describes the northern region of Western Australia, covering a distance of about 500 km in both an east-west and north-south direction. Paintings are located in both limestone and quartz-sandstone shelters and caves. Art surfaces are found in shelters and recesses under overhangs of boulders and rocky outcrops on flat plains and in cliff edges in gorges and plateau escarpments.

The oldest surviving paintings are bonded to the rock with red pigment residues and thin overlying silica skins. It is quite possible there were once other early paintings in thicker white or yellow pigments or in charcoal which have since completely weathered away. This differential weathering of the various pigments is particularly obvious in one large group of early paintings where the red parts of the paintings survive and gaps occur where white and yellow once were (Welch, 1990). Amongst the more recent paintings are those that survive with pigments such as white clay, yellow, charcoal or mud and figures made by pressing onto the rock wall beeswax resin from native beehives (Welch, 1995). By examining the degree of weathering and the overlaying of paintings it is possible to determine a chronological sequence for much of the art (Welch, 1993a). Human figures are a common theme and certain types are found over a wide range. Based on my research of over one thousand rock art sites, some of the chronological periods appearing in the art can be summarised as:

1. The Archaic Period.
2. The Period of Tasselled Figures.
3. The Period of Bent Knee Figures.
4. The Period of Straight Part Figures ( With Missing Pigment).
5. A diverse range of coexisting painting traditions including Painted Hands with Long Fingernails and Plant People.
6. The Wandjina Period.
7. The Contact Period.

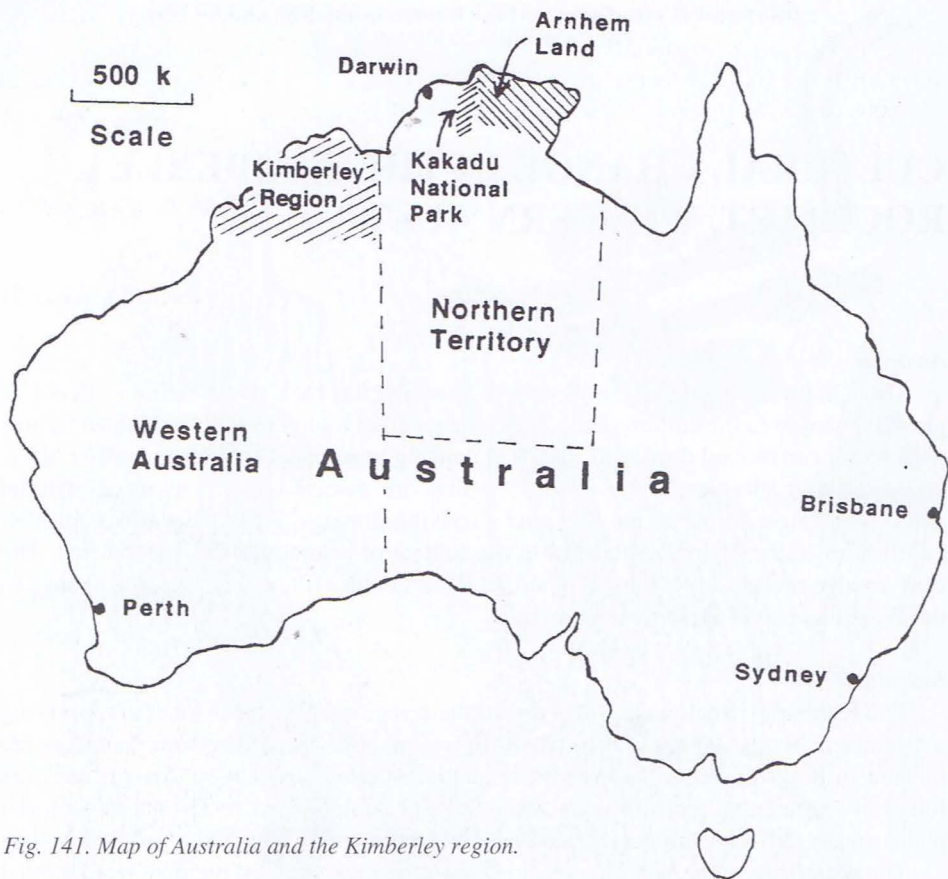


Fig. 141. Map of Australia and the Kimberley region.

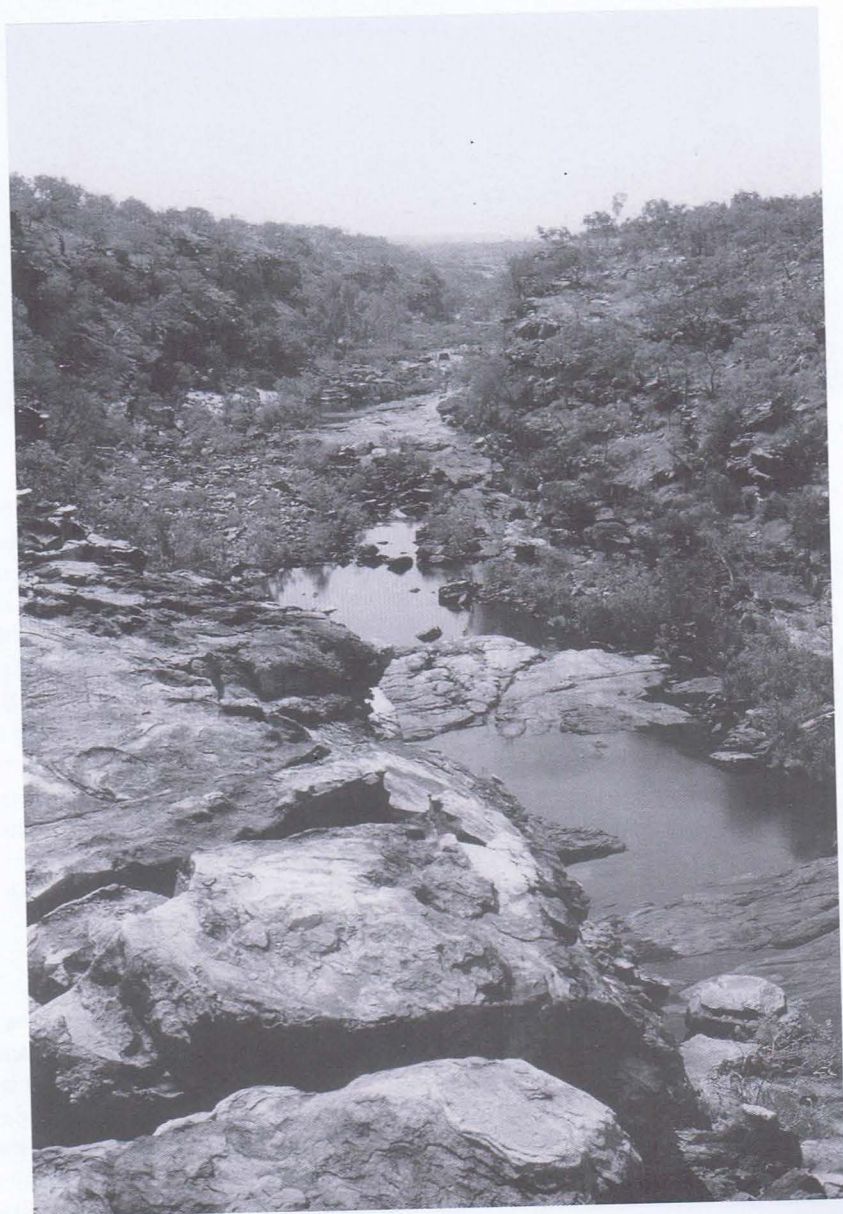
Four of these periods are named after the dominant human figures present in the art. However, many other motifs such as plants and animals, hand, foot and boomerang stencils, thrown object prints, feather prints and grass prints were painted during these periods. Some motifs, such as simple human figures holding boomerangs in each hand, appear to span from the Period of Tasselled Figures to the Contact Period. Other motifs, for example one where hands are painted showing long fingernails, appear to occur in a narrower time frame, but still overlap with other periods.

This chronology is based on the first appearance of each motif described in the art. There seems to be overlapping with motifs from earlier periods continuing into later periods in some instances. For example, some Tasselled Figures continue with Bent Knee Figures and some Straight Part Figures appear as fresh as older Wandjina Figures.

The Thylacine, or Tasmanian Tiger, was a marsupial wolf believed to have become extinct on mainland Australia about 2,000 to 3,000 years ago. One example appears to be contemporary with the Painted Hands with Long Fingernails, indicating an approximate age for some of this art. However, preliminary radiocarbon age estimates for some of the art includes 1490 years before the present for one Tasselled Figure (Watchman *et al*, 1997, p. 20), again indicating the probable overlapping nature of these art themes and styles.

The early paintings of the Kimberley have become known as "Bradshaw Paintings", named after the pastoralist who first described them in 1892. Because of the vast array

of early painting styles and techniques I have concentrated on simple, descriptive terms to name the early art. Interestingly, following Bradshaw's diary and notes, I have retraced his original trip and discovered he was on the Roe River and not the Prince Regent River as he thought. I have located what I believe was the river gorge containing his original site, but I could not find the exact art site recorded by Bradshaw. It may be elsewhere in the area, or possibly the paintings he drew were a composite from several sites or may have been largely reproduced from memory, although he noted that he sketched them at the time.



*Fig. 142. Manning Creek Gorge, Central Kimberley.*



Fig. 143. Rock art shelter with small cupules on vertical walls, seen at left.

This paper will discuss the cultural changes seen in the rock art of the Kimberley region. Firstly, we should think about the idea that we can deduce changes about a culture by looking at the art. For example, if later art depicts more cultural items or activities than earlier art, items of material culture seen in the later art may be absent from the earlier art for a number of reasons, not only that they simply didn't exist then.

Such items may have existed in the past culture but were simply not painted, or they may have been painted in less stable pigments and have not survived. It may not necessarily mean there was a gradual accumulation of material culture items with time. However, for the Kimberley region the reverse situation is found. That is, some items of material culture appearing in the early art do not appear in the later art and are absent from contemporary Aboriginal culture of the area. This is true of the tasselled belts and armbands worn by the early Tasselled Figures, some of the wider skirts, aprons and armbands worn by Bent Knee Figures, and some forms of the elaborate, composite headdresses worn by the Straight Part Figures.

### ***The Archaic Period: Early human rock markings***

Both figurative and non-figurative rock engravings are found at a few locations and are not part of this discussion. However, small cupules 2,5 to 6 cm in diameter are found in many shelters and appear on vertical rock walls in numbers ranging from just a few on smaller surfaces to hundreds on larger surfaces. These are usually heavily patinated except at a few sites where they appear fresher. Figure 143 is an occupation shelter with art on the back walls and cupules can be seen on the left hand vertical wall at the shelter entrance. Present-day Aborigines do not generally recognise these as being man-made. Similar cupules occur across northern Australia and on other continents such as the Americas, and I have seen identical cupules on rocks incorporated into some of

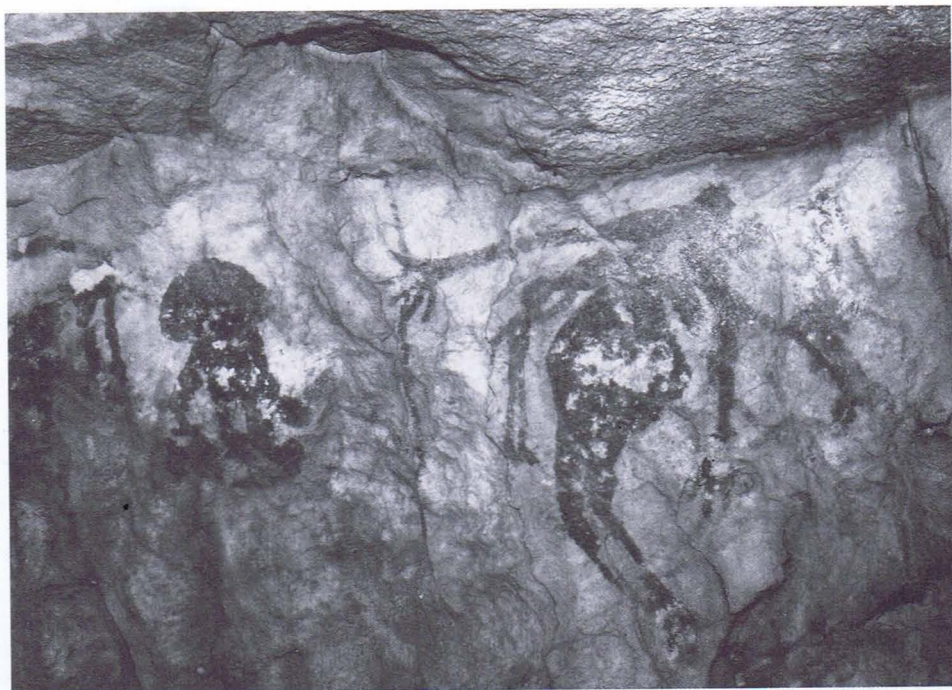


Fig. 144. Pregnant woman breast feeding, 23 cm.



Fig. 145. Drawing. Dancing and gymnastic figures.

the neolithic barrows and prehistoric shelters in Great Britain. It is fascinating to realise that this early human activity was so widely practised around the world and appears no longer part of Aboriginal culture.

#### ***Early Human Figures: Breast feeding and gymnastics***

Although many early human figures in the Kimberley rock art are dressed for ceremony or dance, some larger than life forms are painted with full bodies and appear naked (Welch, 1993b, fig. 39). Many human activities are shown, and fig. 144 depicts a



*Fig. 146. Early "Boomerang Dance". Height of panel 92 cm.*



*Fig. 147. "Tasselled Figures", 85 cm.*



Fig. 148. "Tasselled Figures", 94 cm.

woman breast feeding an infant, her body shape suggesting she is also pregnant. The pigment survives with a mulberry hue and is bonded to the rock, possibly contemporaneous with the Period of Bent Knee Figures.

Figure 145 has been drawn to assist the reader and shows how the figure third from the left has its bottom above the ground level, legs to the left, and head faded upper right with arms raised. It crosses another figure that is drawn upside down as if performing a somersault or cartwheel in mid-air. The arms extend upward and two lines extending down from the head appear to represent two hair plaits. The lower line is painted below the rock overhang and is out of sight in the photograph, but appears to have been drawn to emphasise the position of the ground and the fact the figures are jumping. This painting also survives in bonded mulberry colour and may represent one of the earliest recordings of gymnastics activity in human history. The figures appear naked with plaited hair. When I showed Aborigines this image they could not interpret it, but when I pointed out that someone was performing a cartwheel they were very surprised that people would have done this in the past.

#### ***Early Boomerang dances/ceremonies***

Figure 146 shows human figures in a frontal alignment holding boomerangs and with their heads having a long protuberance. This protuberance is generally interpreted by Aborigines as representing the *conical headdress* known to the Ngarinyin tribe as "Ngadari" (Welch, 1996a). This is made from a roll of paperbark (*Melaleuca species*) tied around with human hair string or bush string and painted with ochre. In historic times this conical headdress has been worn in ceremonies across Australia and during these Aborigines often carry weapons or objects and wave them about. Carrying a boomerang in each hand is common in Australian Aboriginal dance, and the rock art shows that this activity has a long tradition, fig. 146 being an early painting with overlying silica skin and rock spalling. Various forms of simple human figures and stick-like figures holding boomerangs such as this example, occur throughout the art sequence, revealing the continuity of this "boomerang dance" (Welch, 1996b). As we shall see, during the Period of Bent Knee Figures, the same headdress and the holding of boomerangs also feature.

#### ***Period of Tasselled Figures: the feather tassel dance***

Tasselled Figures are characterised by having various tasselled decorations hanging from the waist, headdress or upper arm bands. Many are painted in a flowing, elegant style with curvaceous lines and an emphasis on anatomical parts such as the pectoral (chest) muscles and a stomach paunch.

Figure 147 shows human figures wearing a range of headdresses, decorated arm bands and tasselled belts. One figure has vertical lines and pendants or tassels from the head area. Figure 148 shows human figures with long headdresses, tassels from the waist, pendants or tassels from the head regions, decoration poked into upper armbands and carrying bags with long, string handles. Figure 149 shows two human figures surrounded by a line which ends at the outer hand of each figure. This line may represent decorated string used in ceremony, and the appearance is consistent with a string threaded through seed pods or leaves and held by two dancers. The small animal shown beside the string may be depicting a model or effigy of a totemic animal such as a possum, important for that ceremony.

The tasselled items, bags and decorated string seen on these figures are no longer





Fig. 149. "Tasselled Figures" with decorated string and animal effigy, 90 cm.

part of Kimberley Aborigines' material culture, and the artistic style is different to any contemporary or recent Aboriginal art style in Australia. This has resulted in some people interpreting this as if there were once a completely different race of people in the area or that the style may have been introduced from elsewhere (Walsh, 1994). However, feather tasselled belts and arm bands are made for special Aboriginal ceremonies still held to this day 1,000 km to the east in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory and almost all the material culture associated with these figures can be found there, including the tapering headdresses, decorated strings held between the hands, decorated poles, small models of animals and sacred bags held during ceremonies. String was made traditionally by a number of ways; in the northern Kimberley human



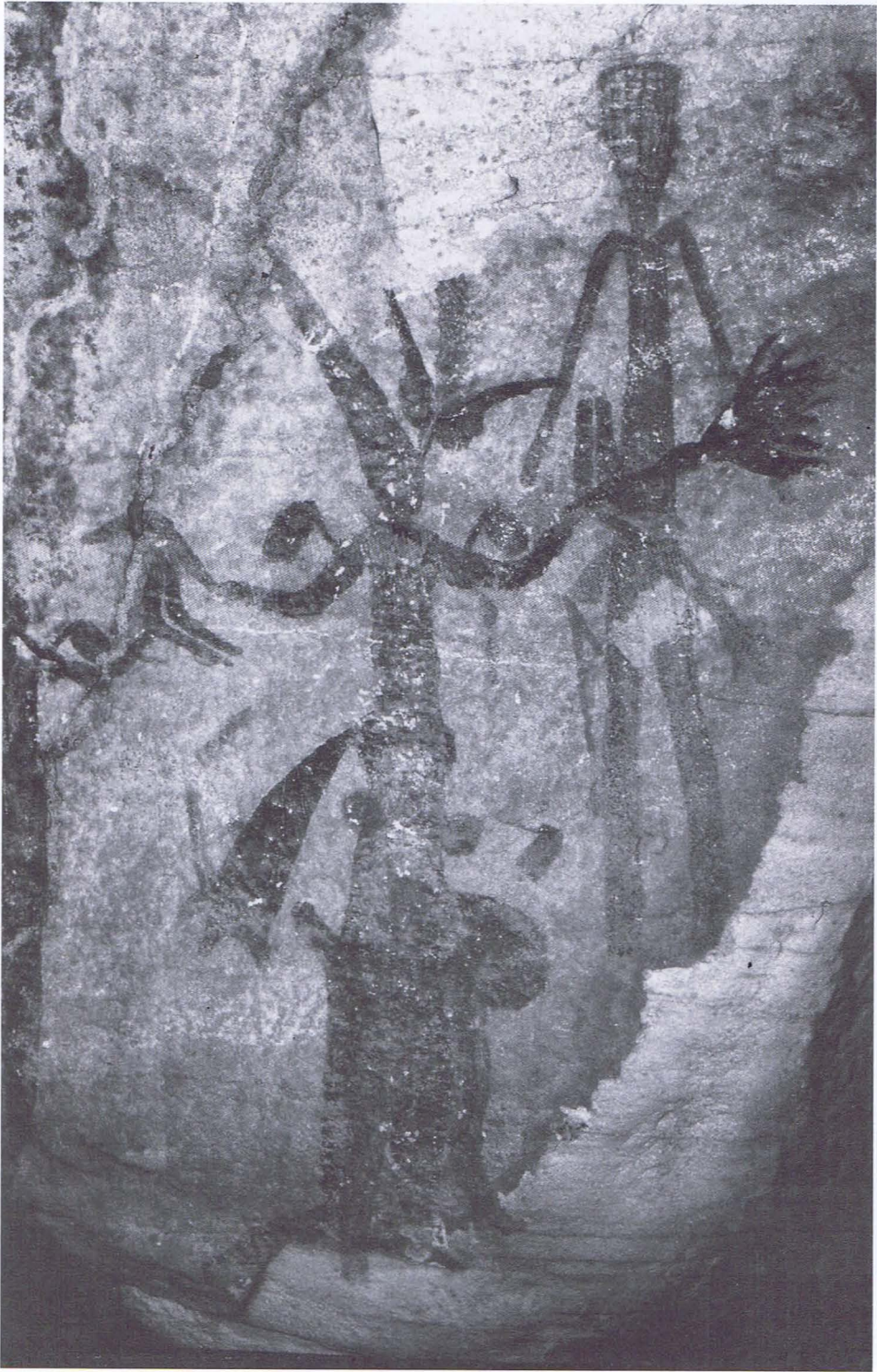
Fig. 150. "Bent Knee Figures". Tallest 60 cm.

hair and the root of Boab trees (*Adansonia gregorii*) were popular materials, while across Arnhem Land human hair, the bark of Banyan trees (*Ficus virens*) and possum fur were used. The image of fig. 149, although from the Kimberley, was interpreted by one Arnhem Land Aboriginal elder as people engaged in a ceremony, the animal being a possum and the line possibly representing possum fur string, an important item for his region.

Tasselled Figures are found over a 400 km range and appear to represent various scenes of important dances or ceremonies held in that area in the past. As previously mentioned, paintings depicting people with tassels appear to span a long time period, and because so many early human figures in the art appear to represent people dressed



Fig. 151. "Bent Knee Figures". Tallest 44 cm.



*Fig. 152. "Bent Knee Figure" with fly whisk and winged headdress, 58 cm.*

for ceremony, I see no reason to believe that the artists who painted specifically the Tasselled Figures came from some other region. I would suggest the following is a more likely sequence of events as to how the paintings evolved: The dances or ceremonies portrayed probably developed gradually first and may have evolved from a more archaic culture or time. This elaborate dress, which probably took weeks or months to prepare, became widely known in the region and people may have travelled from distant parts to join in the ceremonies, just as they have in historic times. This might have been in the form of either secret dances, restricted only to the initiated men, or to "open" dances that could be witnessed by the women and children. It would only have needed one gifted artist to develop the beginnings of the Tasselled Figure style and to record those events of the day. This person may have practised on bark or any flat rock, then taught others and developed a school of artists. For example, in recent times in Australia, one person was responsible as a catalyst for each of two large Aboriginal art movements, the central Australian naturalistic water colour paintings on paper and the Western desert dot paintings with acrylic paint on flat boards.

In historic times Aborigines have travelled two hundred kilometres on foot to meet for important ceremonies, some of which lasted for many weeks and were attended by several hundred people. Trading took place at these meetings where items such as weapons, utensils, ochres, stories and songs were exchanged. At some of these ceremonies even one's wife was lent out in exchange for goods and formal wife swapping was practised. As a result of exchange, trade routes were well developed across Australia by the time of European settlement. For example, pearl shell body ornaments from the Kimberley coast were traded between tribes to find their way 2,000 km into central and southern Australia. Trade, with its exchange of ideas, has resulted in changes in the traditional cultural activities of Aboriginal people in historic times. For example, the Kunapipi ceremony was noted to be spreading across Arnhem Land in the 1940s, and the decoration on sacred bull roarers in one part of the Northern Territory changed from being painted black to being incised during the 1950s. There is every reason to believe that such gradual cultural changes may have occurred amongst Aborigines for millennia.

The very nature of elaborate ceremonies brought people together. Those with natural artistic abilities could have met, exchanged ideas, and the Tasselled Figures, if not the dances themselves, became painted over a wider area. With time, the ceremonial dress has changed, and the artists of the Kimberley have placed an emphasis on different types or parts of ceremonies, producing the Bent Knee Figures and Straight Part figures.

The material culture of the artists of Tasselled Figures, now found in other parts of Australia, could quite easily have developed independently within any region. Until many more paintings are dated we cannot be certain whether other old human forms found in the art pre-date Tasselled Figures or whether Tasselled Figures were painted for thousands of years.

The first Australians must have migrated from Asia, through Indonesia or New Guinea and there may have been several migrations over time. It is well known that the people of New Guinea and Irian Jaya to the north of Australia have very elaborate ceremonial dress incorporating feathers and tassels. I have taken my search into Asia and discovered that a feather tassel skirt is worn at certain ceremonies amongst the Yao and Dong minority groups in the Guangxi Autonomous Region of China. These minorities have their own language, customs, dress and beliefs, and the people live in remote mountain villages where they have retained their individual cultures throughout

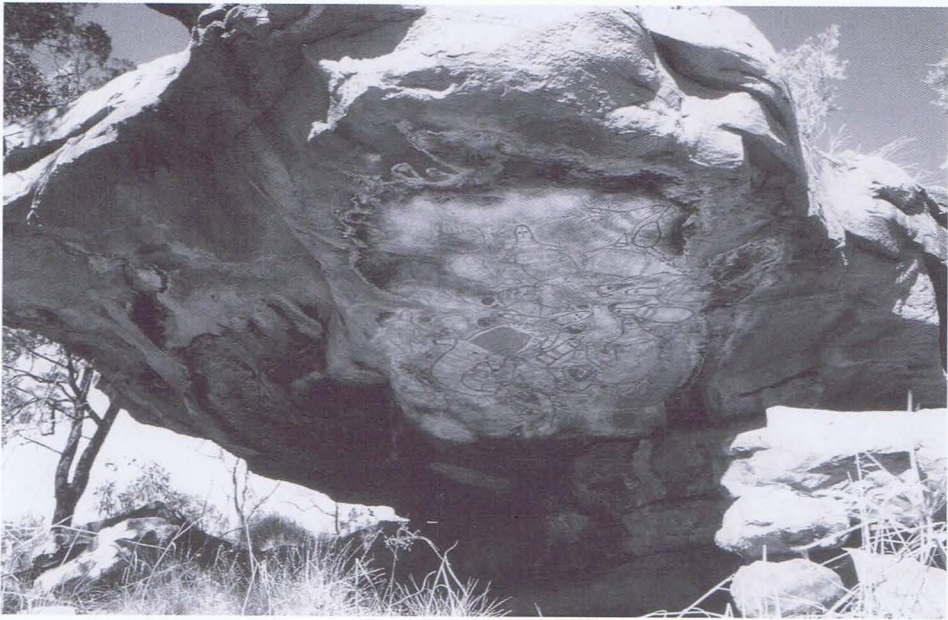


Fig. 153. Goanna (lizard) site.

over 2,000 years of recorded Chinese history. Of course, such a feather tassel belt could have been developed independently in each locality at any time. But, it is also possible that this represents the continuity of a material culture item that was used in dance by people with common origins or common trading partners, thousands of years ago. Without the study of early art we have no way of seeing early evidence of such perishable items.

#### ***Period of Bent Knee Figures: the kangaroo hopping dance***

Figures 150-152 show Bent Knee Figures with their characteristic profile or semi-profile stance and knees bent as if they depict people dancing or hopping. This style often emphasises the calf musculature, as seen in these examples. The headdress is long and conical, usually pointing upward, consistent with the *Ngadari* headdress previously described. In historic times cockatoo or emu feathers were frequently placed in the end of this headdress in both the Kimberley and other regions and some figures in the art show feathers at the end, while others have a decoration appearing as a knob at the headdress's end, as seen here.

Bent Knee Figures usually hold a boomerang in each hand with no other weapons and this feature, along with upper arm decoration of some kind, is similar to present day Aboriginal ceremonies from the Kimberley. However, a triangular shaped object, possibly representing a bag, is also often shown carried (fig. 151), and although no such object is known to the Kimberley aborigines today, sacred dilly bags woven from various plant fibres are worn in ceremonies across Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia.

Figure 152 shows a Bent Knee Figure holding boomerangs and a fly whisk. Such fly whisks, made from emu feathers attached to a stick, are still made across northern Australia and sometimes used in ceremonies (Welch, 1996a, p. 117). Figure 152 also

illustrates an important example of superimposition of paintings. The rock surface containing the legs of this figure has eroded away and over it, on the more recently exposed surface, can be seen the pigment of a later Straight Part Figure.

Bent Knee Figures are painted without fingers showing, as if they were wrapped around the objects being held. This is different to the Tasselled Figures who often have objects painted to the side of an open hand.

Rather than tassels from the waist, the Bent Knee Figures have different, wider waist decorations, painted in different forms and sizes with one type triangular in shape. Some of the Kimberley forms are similar to the waist appendages seen on Dynamic Figures in early Arnhem Land art (Chaloupka, 1993, p. 106-121) and these are consistent with the person wearing a string belt with various materials such as small branches, paperbark or a woven material tucked into or tied on to the belt.

A small apron of triangular shape similar to many on the Bent Knee Figures is unknown in Aboriginal culture today, but artistic licence could partially account for this. However, other waist decoration was used in ceremony in various parts of Australia including a woven rectangular form in parts of the Northern Territory, and Aborigines often had belts made from human hair, possum fur, or plant fibre string with fringes hanging down which might appear as a solid material when drawn. At other times smaller objects such as pearl shell were attached to this belt. Sometimes bushes were used during ceremonies and hung down on both sides of the performer as low as the mid calf. "A sort of apron made of dressed skins" was recorded in southern Australia last century (Smyth, 1878, p. 167) and it is possible the triangular shaped waist appendage seen both on Kimberley Bent Knee Figures and Kakadu/Arnhem Land Dynamic Figures was similarly made from animal skin tucked into, or woven on to a belt.

The upper arm protuberance seen on Bent Knee Figures hangs from a stalk

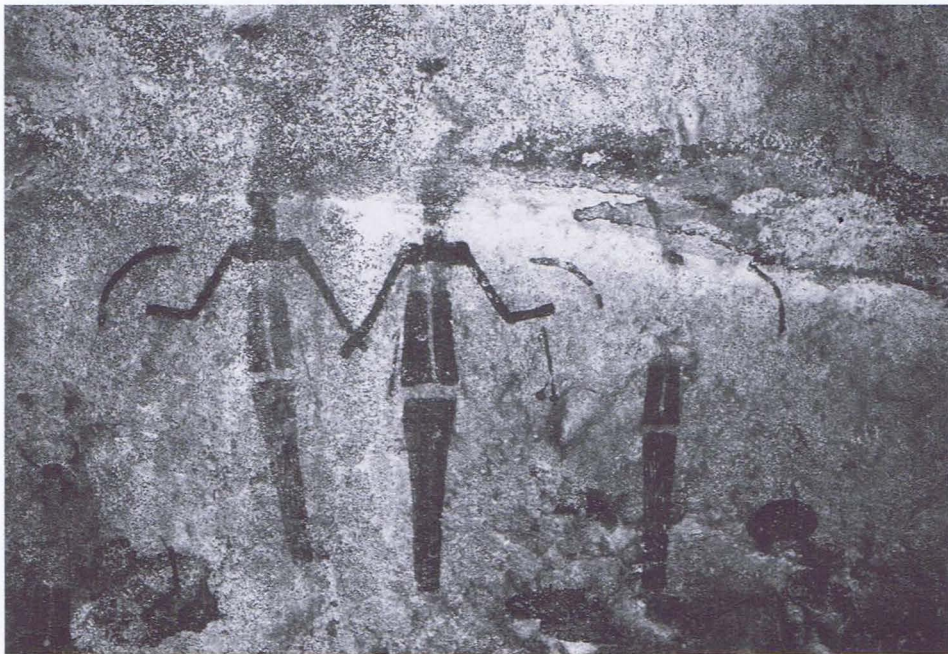


Fig. 154. "Straight Part Figures" with boomerangs, spears and spearthrowers, 32 cm.

extending upwards and probably represents some light object such as a bent leaf, feather or some other material attached to a stick and tied to, or tucked into, an armband. In historic times usually a broad feather, fine emu feathers, or small twigs or leaves are poked into such an upper arm band and worn during ceremonies. However, the shape on Bent Knee Figures is characteristically rounded, unlike the items used today, but similar in shape to a curved leaf used for an upper arm band in New Guinea. The item seen in the art is almost exclusive to the Bent Knee Figures and must have been made specifically for the ceremony being depicted.

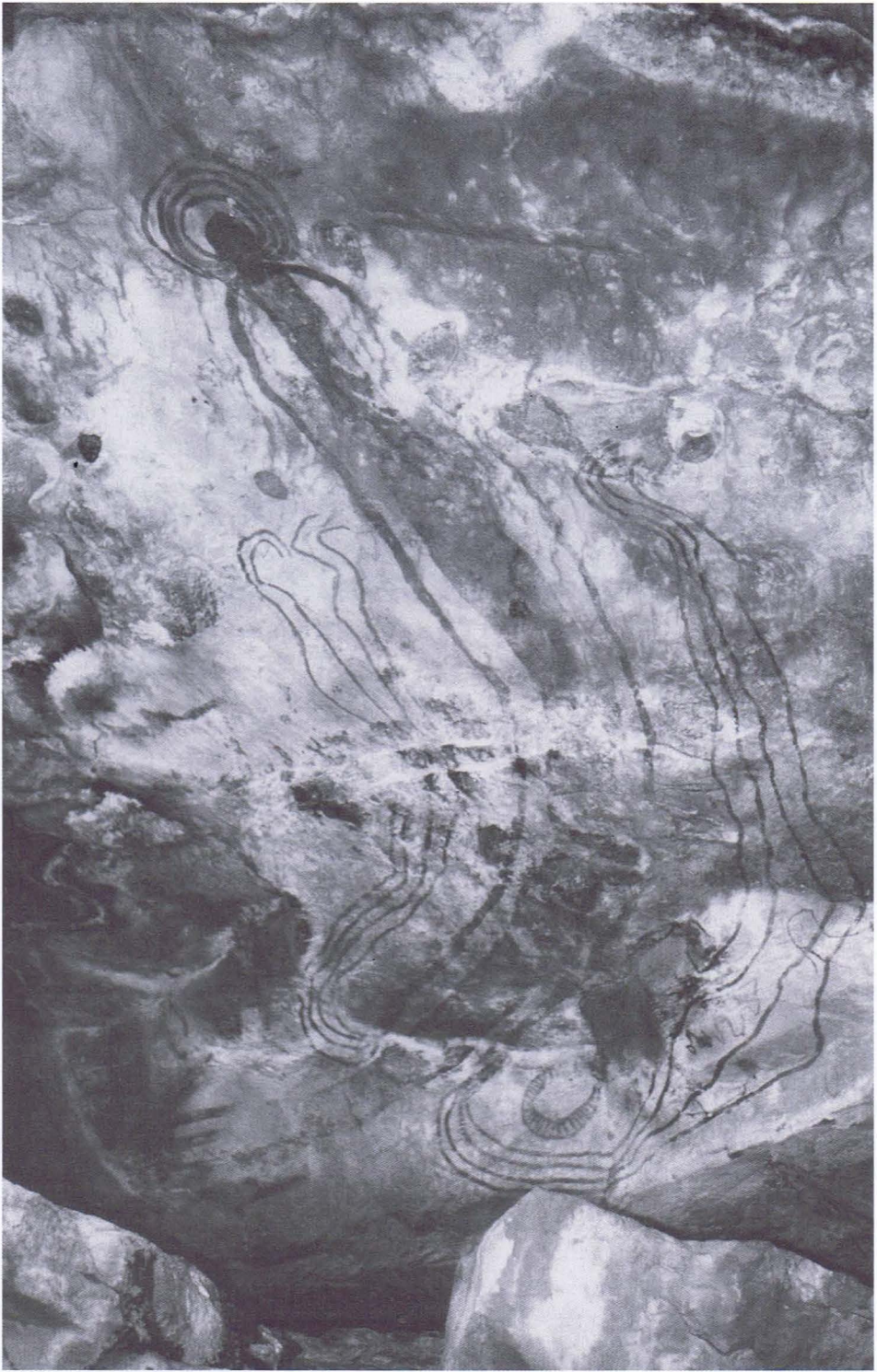
Life-sized paintings of macropods (kangaroos and wallabies) are sometimes associated with Bent Knee Figures when the chosen rock wall is large enough to accommodate such paintings. In their dances Aborigines often mimic the actions of various animals, and the hopping action of a kangaroo or wallaby is a common theme today. There are also small hopping marsupials in the Australian bush which have been the subjects of Aboriginal mythology and ceremony. Singing, dancing and play acting were important parts of traditional Aboriginal daily life, and a short play might be acted out where a man showed the other members of the tribe how he stalked and killed a kangaroo and someone else might play the part of the kangaroo. However, the Bent Knee Figures are found over a wide area and are elaborately dressed, indicating they represented something more important than just a casual play.

During ceremonies or festivals important Aboriginal dances may tell stories of Ancestral Heroes in the Dreamtime. The part of an animal character is taken by a person wearing a headdress or body decoration representing that animal, or they may hold a model or an object representing it. However, in the art, the animal itself can be shown. Bent Knee Figures may represent people taking part in a dance or ceremony that includes hopping with knees together, imitating the actions of a kangaroo, bird or other

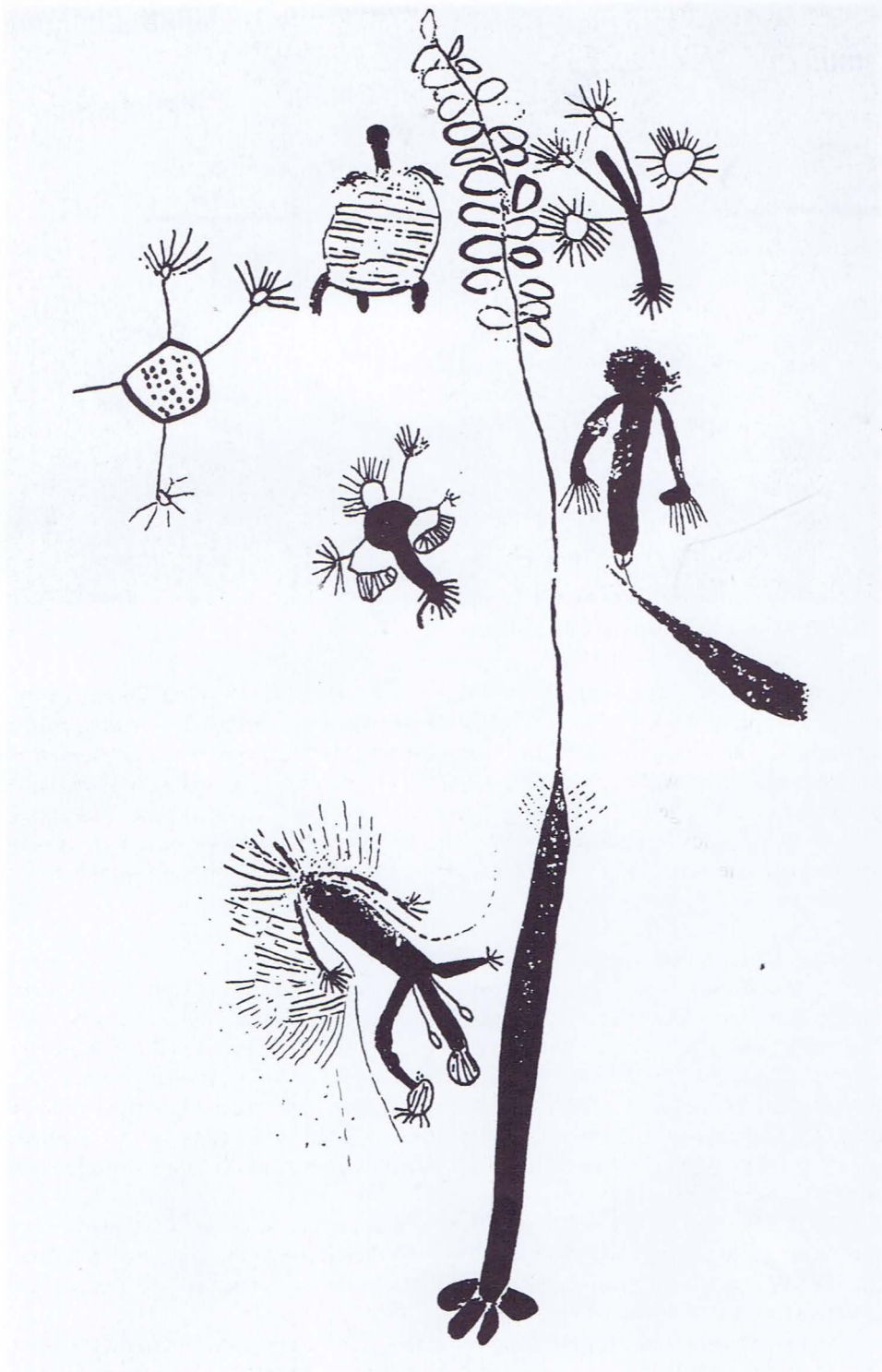


*Fig. 155. "Straight Part Figures". Tallest 43 cm.*





*Fig. 156. "Plant Person" 3,5 m. Kimberley region, Australia.*



*Fig. 157. Plant, length 4 m. Kimberley region, Australia.*



Fig. 158. Painted hands with long fingernails.

hopping animal. It appears that the paintings were story panels showing this ceremony, and when space permitted, more detail was shown with sometimes the image of a kangaroo or kangaroos, at other times the image of a bird, which were also important in the story associated with the ceremony. In parts of the Kimberley and in Arnhem Land today, Aboriginal legend has it that *kangaroo people* were the first people in the area. These were mythical kangaroos that had both human and animal abilities. Paintings of kangaroo people occur later in the Kimberley art and are also found in the rock art of Kakadu National Park and Arnhem Land.

#### *Period of Straight Part Figures: the shuffling spear dance*

The next major group of human figures are painted in a frontal stance, often with straight lines and edges featuring as if the skill of painting figures with curvaceous lines has changed to a skill of painting human figures as straight as possible. The people portrayed often carry spears and “hooked stick” spearthrowers, occasionally strings, and are dressed with elaborate headdresses and sometimes small waist appendages, though these are often missing because they have been painted in white or yellow pigment which has since weathered away. They are not shown using their spears to fight each other or to hunt animals.

Figure 154 is part of a panel of over twenty similar figures. The two outer ones seen here have zig-zag string decoration hanging from their head region and small, pendant-like objects decorate the sides of the head. Two spearthrowers can just be seen amongst a boomerang and two spears between the first and second figures.

Figure 155 shows three Straight Part Figures, each having missing pigment from their arms that once held a boomerang in one hand and a spearthrower in the other. The arms holding the spearthrowers on the two left hand figures cross over and the



Fig. 159. Wandjina figures. Kimberley region, Australia.

spearthrowers appear faded, close to the next figure's body. The heart shaped tip of the headdresses appear separately, above the figures.

The headdresses seen on these figures are different again, and were composite headdresses, being made up of several parts. This included a central, cylindrical or barrel-like shape which may have been made from paperbark or other wadding tied with string. From this central part, various extensions were placed including branch-like shapes possibly representing twigs or feathers, heart shapes perhaps representing vine leaves, and stick shapes. A simple form of this headdress with just the central barrel shape is still worn for ceremonies in the Kimberley, northern Queensland and central Australia and is made from a roll of paperbark (*Melaleuca species*) usually tied with human hair string.

The majority of these figures survive with red pigment bonded to the rock. Gaps occur where less stable pigments such as white or yellow were placed and at first I named these figures "Bichrome Figures" because I believed many were probably painted originally in just two colours. However, further research revealed that many were once painted in three colours, so I changed their name to "Figures With Straight Parts and Missing Pigment" or just "Straight Part Figures". An overlap with the Bent Knee Figures occurs with some examples showing the hopping stance and waist appendage of the earlier figures (Welch, 1993c, p. 101-102). Similarly, there is a continuity into the later Wandjina period with recent examples of Straight Part Figures still retaining white and yellow pigments and there are paintings showing the gradual development of the Wandjina head shape.

Some examples of Straight Part Figures carry only a boomerang in one hand and a "hooked stick" spearthrower in the other. Others carry bunches of spears originally painted in coloured sections. This colouring may have represented the decoration placed on spears carried in a ceremony or may have represented composite spears made from a light bamboo or soft wood shaft and a hardwood point.

The Straight Part Figures could be dressed for fighting or dressed for ceremony. Although clutches of spears are obviously held if one is going out to hunt or fight, they are also held and rattled together to make a noise during parts of burial rituals both in the Kimberley and Arnhem Land regions and during certain ceremonies across Australia. The fact that these figures have such elaborate headdresses would make it unlikely, in Aboriginal culture, for them to be dressed to go hunting or racing around fighting, and the most likely activity portrayed is a ceremony. Some traditional dances saw Aborigines shuffling with the legs held straight, and if spears were held in a vertical alignment as shown, there would have been little room to be jumping and throwing the legs around in a vigorous dance because a person would catch their feet on their own or their neighbour's spears! Thus, I believe it is safe to say we are probably looking at paintings depicting people engaged in important parts of a ceremony sometimes involving holding spears, possibly with the performers taking part in a shuffling dance, while at other times with just the spearthrower and a boomerang being waved about.

### ***Plant People***

At some time, corresponding approximately with the Period of Straight Part Figures, rock artists painted humanised forms of plants, just as they did of animals with the kangaroo man. One form of these is seen in fig. 156 where an anthropomorph 3.5 m tall is characterised by having extremely long, thin arms, fingers, and trunk with no legs. Large forms of this anthropomorph are found throughout the northern Kimberley and Aborigines interpret these figures as being either a "powerful spirit figure of some kind", a "Wandjina", or a "Lightning Man". When it is interpreted as a Lightning Man the attenuated limbs are thought to represent lightning. The paintings appear older than Wandjina figures and pre-date present day Aboriginal knowledge, many people being unsure of the figure's significance.

However, I discovered fig. 157 painted across a large shelter ceiling and noted the central figure of a plant and the similarity between the foot section of some of the anthropomorphs and the base of this painting. Figure 157 is interpreted by Aboriginal people as either a long yam or as a small water lily known as *yamu* (*Kwini* tribe) where the thicker, straight section represents the stem growing below the water surface and the bulbous ends represent the edible tubers which grow into the mud below the water. With a yam, the section above ground usually grows like a creeper and with *yamu* the leaves are the lilies across the surface of the water. Hence, paintings of the kind seen in fig. 156 appear to have a base similar to edible plant tubers or roots and the attenuated limbs might be a representation of the plant growing either as a creeper or spreading across the water. Thus, although the anthropomorphs similar to fig 156 are interpreted differently now, it is possible they once represented a widely known plant person who may have been an important deity in the culture of the people of the time.

### ***Painted hands with long fingernails***

Figure 158 shows detail from part of a large panel containing animal tracks, animals, painted hands and other motifs. Similar compositions and painted hands are found in rock shelters over a wide area of the northern Kimberley, from the coast to at least 200 kilometres inland. The hands and surrounding figures are often divided into segments and orange-red pigment, as seen here, is the most common pigment residue seen, though some survive in a mulberry colour. At one end of the spectrum are large panels,

possibly story panels, with over 20 motifs, while at the other end are single motifs such as macropod (kangaroo or wallaby) footprints or the human hands.

The interpretation of long fingernails is interesting, for Aborigines interpret the presence of long fingernails on hands in different ways and there is no immediate recognition of these paintings by them. Some associate long nails with evil or the devil, while others see them as normal for old people. One informant to whom I spoke had his own nails extending one centimetre beyond the fingers, while the oldest, inactive people in a camp may have fingernails two centimetres longer and I have seen a hand stencil with fingernails this long in the same region. Another interpretation is that the paintings represent stories with the hands representing the body of the traditional owner.

Similar varying beliefs about long nails are found amongst non-Aboriginal people with some associating them with evil while other people grow and paint their long nails.

### *The Wandjina Period*

*Wandjina* is the name given by the *Worora* and surrounding tribes of the northern Kimberley to important ancestral heroes who ensure a good annual wet season's rains and subsequent plentiful food source. These mythological beings are painted in a distinct style with detailed eyes and nose, but no mouth (fig. 159). Paintings of a similar style are found throughout the Kimberley, also known under their individual names unique to each locality or tribe,

The headdress on the Wandjina paintings is an arc or horseshoe shape which may have evolved from an early, rounded headdress seen on some Tasselled Figures. As far as I know, this headdress type is no longer used in Kimberley ceremony, but is made for sacred ceremonies in central Australia. This rounded headdress, sometimes with tassels, also appears during the Period of Straight Part Figures (Welch, 1990, plates 2 & 3, on back cover) and may have been the basis for some of the Wandjina headdress shapes.

Plants and animals also feature in the Wandjina Period and many are painted in a distinctive style of bold lines on a white sprayed background. The eyes on animals are drawn together and fine regular dots and dashes are drawn in lines across the bodies. Many plants and animals painted in the Wandjina period are recognised as important totems to the Aborigines and sometimes they dominate a rock shelter. Learning about these beliefs from the Aborigines allows much insight into our understanding of the earlier art such as the previously mentioned plant people. Because Aborigines believe in reincarnation and that many plants and animals were once people, they may produce paintings consisting of half plant or animal, half human features because at one time they were one and the same.

### *The Contact Period*

The Contact Period overlaps with the Wandjina Period and takes us to the present time. The name indicates evidence in the art of contact with people from outside Aboriginal Australia, with paintings during this period showing the material culture of visitors: on the coast, boats with sails and people smoking pipes (Crawford, 1968, p. 76-79), while further inland one example shows a person with a stockman (cowboy) hat (Welch, 1993c, p. 100).

For at least two to three hundred years prior to 1900, Macassan fishermen from the Celebes, now part of Indonesia, visited Australia's northern shores, sailing with monsoon winds and collecting the sea slug, also known as sea cucumber, trepang, or *beche de mer*, found in shallow waters. This was boiled and dried in Australia, taken

back to the Celebes, and from there it was traded with the Dutch and made its way to China where it was a highly prized food. The Macassans also introduced glass and metal into Aboriginal culture and these were subsequently utilised to make spearheads.

Dutch explorers were sailing around the Kimberley coast by 1644, later followed by the British and by the 1890s British settlers from the southern half of Australia were making their way into the Kimberley. Generally, very little art reflects these occurrences and traditional motifs have continued to be painted through the contact period.

### Discussion

The study of Kimberley region rock art gives a unique insight into the perishable material culture items of early Australian people. It reveals scenes of ceremonies and a culture far more elaborate than we might have imagined. In this way, the rock art reveals information about cultural changes over time, not possible to discover by conventional archaeological digging.

In parts of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, where the dress of the Tasselled Figures survives amongst the Aborigines, most of the recent art produced in rock shelters, on bark or body painting shows details of important totemic plants and animals and legendary heroes which feature in the mythology, rather than paintings of people dressed in ceremony. A study of only the art produced by these people would not necessarily give an insight into the cultural practices of their dances and ceremonies. Thus, it is quite possible the early European artists of Lascaux and Altamira who have also concentrated their artistic efforts on the subjects of animals may have had a similar culture to the Aborigines in Australia and dressed up to the same degree for their important ceremonies. (Measurements accompanying the illustrations refer to their height).

### Acknowledgements

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### Riassunto

La regione di Kimberley, nel nord-ovest dell'Australia, è caratterizzata da arte rupestre che rivela tracce di graduali cambiamenti nella cultura degli aborigeni della zona. Alcune delle figure rappresentate sono associate ad elementi di cultura materiale non presenti in quest'area, ma ancora riscontrabili tra tribù aborigene in altre parti dell'Australia. L'autore, esaminando il grado di erosione e sgretolamento e la sovrapposizione delle immagini, ne propone una sequenza cronologica. Inoltre analizza in dettaglio determinate caratteristiche di ogni epoca e discute i cambiamenti culturali deducibili dall'osservazione dell'arte rupestre. Lo studio di tale arte permette un'intuizione unica degli elementi della cultura materiale dei primi popoli australiani e rivela informazioni sui mutamenti culturali non riscontrabili attraverso i tradizionali scavi archeologici.

### Summary

*The rock art of the Kimberley region of north-western Australia reveals gradual changes in the culture of the Aborigines of that region. Some of the figures represented are associated with items of material culture no longer found in the area, yet surviving amongst Aboriginal tribes in other parts of Australia. The author, by examining the degree of weathering and the overlaying of paintings, proposes a chronological sequence. He details certain traits for each epoch and discusses cultural changes which might be deduced by the art. The study of the rock art of the Kimberley region gives us a unique insight into the perishable material culture items of the early Australian people and reveals information about cultural changes which cannot be deduced by other aspects of archaeological digging.*

### Résumé

L'art rupestre de Kimberley, au nord-ouest de l'Australie, révèle des traces de changements graduels dans la culture des aborigènes australiens de cette zone. Certaines des figures représentées sont associées à des éléments de culture matérielle qui ne sont pas présents dans cette aire géographique, mais qui peuvent être trouvés encore dans les tribus aborigènes d'autres parties de l'Australie. L'auteur, en examinant le degré d'érosion et d'effritement ainsi que la superposition des images, propose une séquence chronologique. Il analyse en détail les caractéristiques de chaque époque et discute des changements culturels pouvant être déduits de l'observation de l'art rupestre. L'étude de cet art permet une approche unique des éléments de culture matérielle des premiers peuples australiens et révèle des informations sur les mutations culturelles indécélables lors des fouilles archéologiques traditionnelles.