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EARLY 'NATURALISTIC' HUMAN FIGURES IN THE KIMBERLEY, AUSTRALIA

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Abstract. This paper describes the earliest surviving paintings of anthropomorphs in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. These paintings appear as ochre stains bonded to quartz-sandstone rock, and most survive as monochrome 'naturalistic' forms. From these human figures, at least two tentative main groups emerge. These two groups, 'tasselled figures' and 'bent knee figures', are discussed here in detail.

Introduction

An overview of the Kimberley region, which comprises the northern part of Western Australia, and a discussion of the previous literature regarding the rock art has already been presented in this journal (Welch 1990). For several decades the rock art of the region has been broadly divided into two groups. 'Bradshaw figures' was the term used to describe the older human figures **1**) now bonded to the rock. 'Wandjina' is the name given by Aborigines to paintings of certain mythological beings. These paintings are more recent, and survive with thickly applied pigments, often comprising red, white and black colours. The term 'Wandjina figures' came to be used to describe paintings from this period (Table 1).

One aim of the author's research has been to discover whether a chronological sequence of art styles exists in the Kimberley. In order to do this, aspects of the art such as rock type used, the physical appearance of weathering, rock spalling, and superimpositions have been studied. Initial research revealed that the older 'Bradshaw figures' could be divided into at least two chronologically different groups. The older group survived mainly in monochrome, naturalistic **2**) human forms and was called the 'monochrome art period'. The latter group was found to comprise mainly human figures in a stylised form where often the body was depicted in sections with straight parts and in a frontal stance. Gaps often occurred where pigment was missing (Welch 1990). These paintings were said to belong to a possible 'bichrome art period' (Table 1). Further research conducted on now 700 Kimberley art sites has provided enough superimpositions to determine that, within the previously named 'monochrome art period', there exist at least two major, chronologically different groups of paintings, and they are the subject of this paper. The specific evidence supporting the notion that these two groups are chronologically different have been presented in a separate paper (Welch 1992a).

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the reader, by way of the accompanying illustrations, to these two major groups of painted human figures, which are here named 'tasselled figures' and 'bent knee figures'.

Early human figures

The oldest human figures of the Kimberley consistently appear to be painted in a broadly naturalistic form with tassels hanging from their bodies, tapering headdresses, elbow ornaments, bracelets, a simple belt or waistband such as could have been made from string or hair around their waists, and generally depicted with straight legs. Some have now been found to have boomerangs. These images are usually found to survive in light shades of red and I have termed these the 'tasselled figures' (Figs 1-17; Figs 1 and 8 are on the covers of this issue).

The second major group comprises human figures, often with an upper arm projection, headdresses with a large knobbed extremity, thick forearms, mostly depicted holding boomerangs, sometimes a possible fly-whisk, and skirts. Their legs are most commonly shown bent at the knees. These figures lack tassels and often survive with a dark pigment varying from a mulberry to blackish colour (Figs 18-34). In the following analysis of human figures the knees are said to be bent when their angle is at 5° or more from the straight.

I found it difficult to decide on a name for these paintings that would distinguish them from both the earlier tasselled figures and from other paintings not yet placed into a chronological group. For example, boomerangs are common in this group, but they occur also in association with many other paintings. A common distinguishing feature of this group is that figures are depicted wearing different types of waist appendages than the earlier group. Several forms, discussed below, could be interpreted as representing skirts, bags or tufts of decoration in a belt or waistband. While I called the most common form of waist appendage a 'skirt' or 'apron', I learned that my colleagues researching Kimberley rock art were calling this a 'bag' (J. Schmiechen, pers. comm.) or a 'sash' (Walsh 1992). Some sub-groups are simplified and lack a waist appendage, unless such features were in a now vanished paint (Fig.

1) Throughout this paper, motif definitions are only intended to convey the author's impression of iconic meaning. It is not being suggested that these impressions provide objective identifications of the motifs described. Ed.

2) 'Naturalistic' in terms of European perception and cognition. Ed.

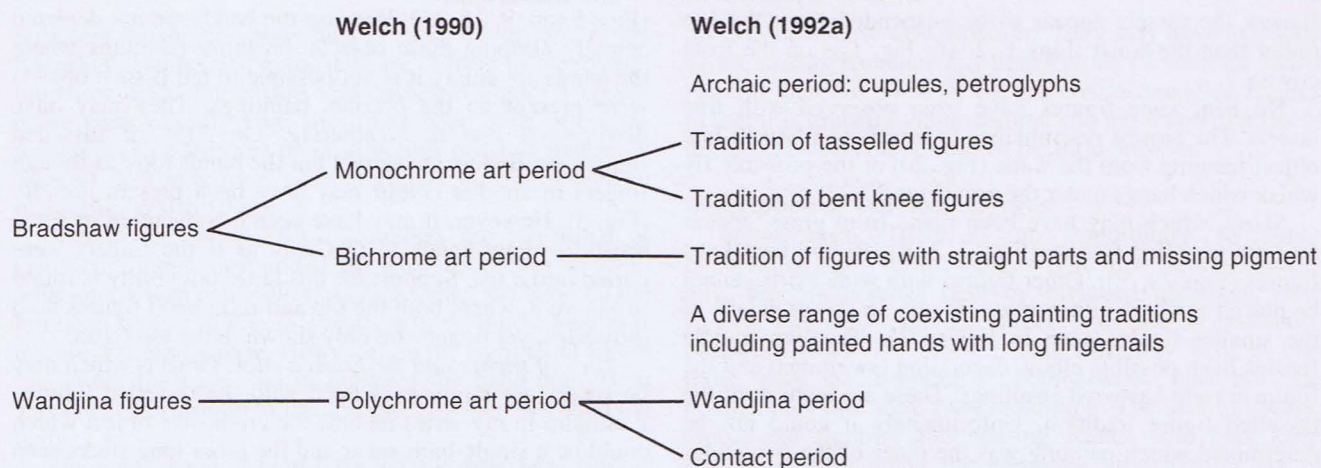


Table 1. Chronological divisions of Kimberley rock art.

18). Other examples have all these regalia but are depicted with straight legs (Figs 20, 21), while others are fully embellished with all the regalia found associated with figures of that time, and bent knees are featured. The difficulties of finding descriptive terms for the various features found in such a large body of rock art are compounded by the idiosyncratic differences between individual artists. In view of the ambiguities of the waist appendages I opted to name these figures after another feature common to the majority of examples, calling them 'bent knee figures' for now. These include all the figures Walsh (1992) has referred to as 'sash Bradshaw figures'.

Although I have called these figures 'naturalistic' in order to distinguish them from stick figures and other forms, both tasselled figures and bent knee figures do display certain stylisation of their body portions. For example, the tasselled figures usually have a very thin trunk and some have long thin fingers or an exaggerated paunch (e.g. Figs 1-3). They may also have exaggerated pectoral muscles curving in to the axillae (Figs 3, 5). Both tasselled figures and bent knee figures often have small feet (Figs 2, 5, 21, 32). In two unusual cases, toes are obvious (Figs 20, 28). The feet in Figure 20 appear to have been retouched, but because the pigment used appears to be the same as the rest of the painting it is not clear whether this was done by the original artist or not.

As well as the naturalistic forms, there are stylised forms of tasselled figures (Fig. 9) and of figures derived from bent knee figures (Fig. 35). Other early naturalistic figures include full-bodied examples that do not fit into either of the two main groups described above, but which may be contemporaneous with some bent knee figures. Figure 38 shows three female figures without any body decoration, but with lines about them and 'in' them as if they have been speared. Figure 39 shows two other human forms without body decoration.

A summary of the major features found in the two main groups follows. All examples surveyed, including heavily weathered ones, were analysed. The percentage 'weathered' (in brackets) indicates the percentage of figures examined in which the feature in question could not be determined due to weathering. Further details of the study are described in Welch (1992a).

Tasselled figures

1. Tassels from the waist/hip 61% (31% weathered). Also tassels from the upper trunk or arms 34%, and head

- dress 17%.
2. Bracelets or bands at the elbow 44% (33% weathered).
3. Single wrist bracelet 32%.
4. Paunch shown 36% (31% weathered).
5. Fingers shown 32% (41% weathered).
6. Lack of spears 99%.
7. Lack of hooked sticks 100%. (By 'hooked stick', I refer to a short stick with a hooked end such as may represent a spearthrower or a fighting pick.)
8. Boomerangs present 9% (uncommon).
9. Baton or wand present 3% (not present in bent knee figures).
10. Red pigment 55%.

Bent knee figures

1. None have been seen with tassels from the waist.
2. None have been seen with fingers shown.
3. Boomerangs present 59%, absent 5% (36% weathered).
4. Mulberry or blackish pigment 84%.
5. Waist appendage present in 56%, absent 11% (33% weathered).
6. Legs bent at knee 56%, absent 23% (21% weathered).
7. Headdress with large knobbed end 51%.
8. Headdress with pendant from end 34%.
9. Holding triangular object 39%.
10. Thickened forearms (probable arm bands or bracelets) 37%.
11. Upper arm protuberances 36%.

Description of tasselled figures

Tassels from the waist or hip are the most common feature, but tassels may also be from the headdress or body (e.g. Figs 1-3). A common feature of the tassels themselves is the occurrence of sets of three as two long and one short tassel. The tassels may end in a tuft or pompom and some examples have inverted 'V' shapes on their ends, consistent with material such as feathers, grass or fur having been twined into the string of the tassel. This practice is seen today with feathered strings from Arnhem Land on objects such as arm bands, headbands, waist girdles, dilly bags, and some ceremonial poles (Isaacs 1984: 80-3, 95, 101, 105, 254-5). The tassels from the waist would most probably have been suspended from a hair or string belt, often not visible on the paintings. It is interesting to note that in historic times, the Wororra tribe of the western Kimberley wore their belt about the hips, not the waist (Love 1917: 27). On some of the tasselled

figures the tassels appear to be suspended from the hip rather than the waist (Figs 1, 2, 16; Fig. 1 is on the front cover).

No bent knee figures have been observed with true tassels. The closest resemblance to tassels is a branch-like object hanging from the waist (Fig. 20) or the probable fly whisk which hangs under the arm (Figs 20-22).

Skirts, which may have been made from grass, appear on both tasselled figures (Figs 2, 3, 8, 10) and bent knee figures (Figs 29, 30). Other figures with wide skirts cannot be placed easily in either group. Figure 36 shows details of the smaller figures seen in Figure 25. The two middle figures have possible elbow decoration (swellings) and the figure at right has wrist swellings. These are features of the tasselled figure tradition. Unfortunately it could not be determined which painting was the older of the two styles shown overlapping in Figure 25. Figure 10 shows human figures with the elbow decoration and sets of three tassels typical of tasselled figures. However, the figure at right also appears to have a similar waist appendage to that seen in Figure 20. The figure at the left appears to hold objects which may be branches with berries. Similar branch and berry motifs, appearing to be of similar age, occur in isolation in other rockshelters in the Kimberley.

Bracelets and arm bands. A swelling presumed to represent a single bracelet appears at the wrist of 32% of tasselled figures (with another 33% too weathered to tell). This feature is absent on all bent knee figures. Figures 2, 3 and 15 show examples of tasselled figures with several bracelets at the wrist. Ankle bracelets/bands appear on only 4% of tasselled figures (Fig. 5) and 1% of bent knee figures (Fig. 22). Ankle decorations made from grass are worn in Aboriginal ceremonies of the Kimberley tribes today (K. Akerman, pers. comm.). Tasselled figures have elbow decoration which sometimes appears to be only a band (e.g. Figs 2-4), while at other times there are projections which may represent feathers, leaves or fur. These often extend both upwards and downwards and may be simple in form (Fig. 1) or complex (Figs 5, 7, 8, 11). Figure 12 is the only example seen so far where a tasselled figure has arm projections appearing as tufts similar to those seen on bent knee figures. As will be discussed later, bent knee figures often have these tufts positioned higher up the arm.

A large *paunch* is featured on some tasselled figures in profile view, below which appears to be a belt from which tassels hang (Fig. 1, and Welch 1990: Fig. 26). Although a waist line is often shown on bent knee figures (Figs 30, 32), it never reaches the naturalistic flow of these paunches found on tasselled figures.

The presence of fingers. In one sub-group of tasselled figures, featuring the paunch and a curved body outline, the fingers are slender and usually correct in number (Fig. 1, and Welch 1990: Fig. 26). In other sub-groups, the number of fingers is often incorrect (Figs 8, 9, 15). Bent knee figures, on the other hand, never show individual fingers. The hand is shown attached to a boomerang or other object and the fingers are not shown, presumably because they are clasping it. The hands of bent knee figures are rarely empty, but in one example they are shown on the hips (Fig. 30).

The lack of weapons associated with most tasselled figures does not exclude the possibility that weapons were present in the original paintings, but were painted in a less durable pigment such as white. Where such objects exist, they are often shown beside the body and not actually held

(Figs 8 top, 9, 15, 16). Because the hands are not depicted actually clasping these objects, on those paintings where the hands are empty it is not possible to tell if such objects were present on the original paintings. They may have disappeared due to weathering. On 21% of tasselled figures, no fingers are shown but the hands look as though fingers in another colour may have been present initially (Fig. 3). However, it may have been a convention of some artists to draw hands in this way as if the fingers were curled into a fist. Support for this latter possibility is found in Figure 8, where both the top and right hand figures hold dilly bags, yet fingers are only shown in the top figure.

Lack of spears and the hooked stick. Objects which may be spears are rarely associated with the tasselled figures. Examples in my series include the crook-like object which could be a single-barb spear and the other long sticks seen in Figure 7. It is interesting to note that the long 'sticks' are held by two smaller figures that appear to lack an elaborate headdress. From this example it is not possible to know whether such long sticks represented spears, digging sticks or ceremonial poles. However, a possible spear is seen in the back of a macropod (Fig. 9), which appears to be part of a single composition with stylised tasselled figures. Below the macropod is a human stick figure and the possible spear above is unusual in that the projections may represent barbs that are pointing the wrong way, and there is a thickening towards the upper end. An example of a single-pronged, single-barbed spear has been seen by J. Schmiechen (pers. comm.). No spears have yet been observed with bent knee figures, and no hooked stick (believed to represent a spearthrower or a fighting pick; Welch 1990) has been identified with either group. Figure 37 shows a weathered, mulberry-coloured figure holding a hooked stick. The pigment and weathering reveal that it may be contemporaneous with some of the bent knee figures, although it has none of their characteristics. One cannot be definite about this placement from just one example, but it is possible that bent knee figures may have been only one of several different art types occurring at the same time. On the other hand, this may be an example of a figure that has evolved just after the bent knee figures, when the hooked stick began to appear in the art.

It was noted that no figures from either of the two groups have yet been identified with shields or unequivocal clubs, nor have they been portrayed with a boomerang or other object tucked into their belts, as appears on human figures depicted in the period of figures with straight parts and missing pigment.

Boomerangs and short sticks. Where boomerangs appear with tasselled figures they are often shown rising vertically from, or just beside, the hand (Figs 13, 16). Similarly, short sticks are shown above and beside the hands (Figs 2, 9, 12). These short sticks could represent hunting or throwing sticks, or they could represent batons or wands. Wands are used today in ceremonial dances in the Kimberley and are held upward as shown in these figures (K. Akerman, pers. comm.). The depiction of these objects sometimes beside, rather than in, the hands may have been an artistic convention or it may indicate that the objects were being juggled, or that they were attached by fine string to the hands.

Painted dots or dashes around the bodies of the human figures are a feature seen on some tasselled figures (Figs 3, 15), but not on the bent knee figures. This is also seen on the dynamic figures of Kakadu art, western Arnhem Land. It is possible that these dots may have been meant to

represent movement, body heat or body odour, and in the Kakadu examples where the dots are in front of the mouth, breath or voice. Other dots and dashes in Figure 3 appear to be parts of dilly bags that must have been originally painted in an additional paint. It is thus possible that other lines of dots may have been originally tassels painted in bichrome (Walsh 1992).

Surrounding bands. Two examples are illustrated of tasselled figures surrounded by what resembles a string with interwoven decoration. At face value, the band on the left hand figures in Figure 3 appears to be almost held as if it were a skipping rope. However, on the right hand figure this is not the case, and in Figure 4 the band appears to surround each arm up to the arm pits and then surround the body.

The head shape of both tasselled and bent knee figures is usually portrayed as quite round, which could be a stylisation of the art traditions. However, it may indicate something of the skull shape of these early Australian artists. This requires further analysis. Another interesting point is that none of these figures are portrayed with beards, necklaces or earrings. It is again possible that some of these features were included in the original paintings in less durable pigments such as white. Long 'strings' ending in tufts, seen in Figure 7, may represent nose decorations.

Tasselled figures: regional variations and sub-groups

The tasselled figures do not form one homogeneous style. It is evident from the examples shown that many different artists have contributed to this group of paintings. In the future it may be possible to find some chronological order amongst the sub-groups, but at present no superimpositions have been found that allow a convincing chronological sequence to be deduced within this group. One major regional variation is that, on the King George River, some of the tasselled figures appear more rigid than elsewhere (Figs 5, 7, 8). One large panel (Fig. 5) has a superimposition which shows an orange pigment form with simple elbow bands, simple three-part tassels from the waist, and the figures holding 'strings'. These have infill orange but are shown here in thin outline. A red-brown form, indicated here in black infill, shows four tasselled figures, very similar in body outline to the orange form but with more elaborate waist tassels and elbow decoration and all holding dilly bags with one hand. Close examination reveals equal rock spalling and it has not been possible to determine with certainty which was painted first. However, the orange form is more faded in general and one wonders whether this was the older painting, and whether darker, red-brown pigment may have been used to better highlight the painted human figures on the white quartz-sandstone. Similarly, a panel on the Mitchell Plateau shows stylised tasselled figures (Fig. 9) which may have been superimposed on very similar figures. The faded figures, shown here in thin outline, consist of two animals and human forms, one with a wide skirt and one with simple, three-part tassels from the waist. The less faded figures, shown in black infill, have more elaborate tassels from the waist, except for the figure at the right which is similar to one of the faded forms. Both the faded and fresher forms are painted in the dark-brown/black colour and one wonders whether the same artist painted both forms in order to create a feeling of depth, or whether the earlier style was copied many years later.

The range of tasselled figures includes all of the northern Kimberley coast to at least 250 km inland and at least

300 km in an east-west direction. They may have extended as far east as Kununurra, where Figure 17 shows a faded painting that has some of the features of tasselled figures in that it is graceful, monochrome and has a tapering head-dress, bracelets and prominent pectoral muscles.

Description of bent knee figures

Boomerangs. There is an opportunity to study boomerang types shown with early human figures. Generally, the boomerangs held by tasselled and bent knee figures are short, though larger ones are occasionally portrayed (Figs 18, 31, 32). One difficulty here is that these may be ceremonial boomerangs, and not the boomerangs that were used in hunting. The lack of spears, clubs, and fighting and hunting scenes with bent knee figures would support the view that these figures are in ceremonial attire. Hard evidence of early boomerang types can be found in examples of boomerang stencils which occur in the Kimberley.

Mulberry to blackish pigment. The use of darker pigments appearing as a mulberry colour is striking in the bent knee figures. Although weathering can sometimes change pigment colour, it appears that a specific method of pigment preparation or an additive such as blood or plant dye was used by the artists of the mulberry-coloured bent knee figures. Possible reasons for the choice of darker pigment include the fact that it stands out more on the quartz-sandstone rock, that there may have been a specific ritual associated with that pigment preparation, or that the people being portrayed were of darker skin. The importance of pigment in the Kimberley rock art has been discussed elsewhere (Welch 1990, 1992a, 1992b).

It is interesting to note that in many New Guinea Highland tribes a distinction can be made between 'festive' and 'martial' adornment. Brighter paints such as red, yellow and white are worn for festive adornment by both men and women, but for martial adornment the men may completely cover themselves with charcoal which is associated with warfare and aggression (O'Hanlon 1989: 89-93). This is remarkably similar to the findings of tasselled figures in reds which could represent a festive adornment, and bent knee figures with their boomerangs and in darker pigment representing the martial adornment. The drawings made to illustrate the two different adornments in O'Hanlon's book actually show the festive adornment figures with straight legs and hands by the side, while the martial adornment figure is shown with bent knees, arms raised, weaponry and in black pigment. This is not to say that both these styles in the Kimberley are two facets of the same art. As previously explained, the oldest human figures appear to be tasselled figures. Bent knee figures appear to have been painted later, although it is possible that later artists may still have painted some tasselled figures.

Waist appendage. A waist appendage is an almost universal feature in some sub-groups of bent knee figures. Other sub-groups appearing to be of the same age and having mulberry pigment and similar accoutrements lack such a waist appendage (Fig. 18). At least four types of waist appendage are seen. The most common is depicted as a triangle shape with three points (Figs 21, 25-27). It is possible that this three-point form is a stylised depiction of that which is seen in Figure 22. Here, the posterior waist projection shows more detail and several hanging 'strands'. In some examples (Fig. 27) this is depicted as leaving the body higher than the waist and a swelling is

shown which would represent the part tied around the trunk. Walsh's term 'sash' may best describe this object because a sash is defined as an ornamental band or scarf worn as a girdle.

The second waist appendage depicted on some bent knee figures is a bulbous form at the front (Figs 25-27). Again, Figure 22 appears to have an embellished form of this projection. This may represent some object that was crafted from fur, string, feathers or some other material. A similar object is seen on New Guinea indigenes, and consists of a large ball of hair string tied to the waist by string (Miller 1950: 160).

The third waist appendage seen is that which looks more like a grass skirt with fuller, wider body (Figs 22, 29, 30, 32). Note that in Figure 29 each of these three waist appendages are seen in the one composition. In this panel the figures in the left section are in profile with most headdresses pointing down and they lack upper arm projections. The figures at right are partly frontal, headdresses point upward, upper arm projections are present and additional objects are carried. A small simpler figure is at the left.

The fourth waist appendage seen on bent knee figures has been previously noted on Figure 20.

Legs bent at the knees. When paintings of humans which contained most of the elements of being monochrome red to black pigment bonded to the rock, having upper arm projections, boomerangs, waist appendages and lacking tassels were grouped and analysed, 56% were noted to have greater than 5° bend at the knees, while this condition could not be determined in 21% due to weathering. Some examples were found with straight legs (Figs 20, 21), as well as groups of fresher looking figures which also lacked waist appendages, but which had other features found in the group such as boomerangs, upper arm projections and knobbed headdresses with feather extensions (Welch 1990: Fig. 28). It is felt that this last example is a more recent development following many of the earlier bent knee figures.

The motif on the right in Figure 19, with legs apparently crossed, lacks any accoutrements, but is painted in dark-red/mulberry and is probably contemporaneous with the bent knee figure shown, located near it in the same shelter. Both these figures were noted by G. Hill in 1910 (Mountford 1937: Figs 28, 34).

Among tasselled figures, only 8% had knees bent greater than 5° (Fig. 16), with 30% being uncertain due to weathering. Of these, the average degree of bending was 26° compared to an average bend of 32° in the bent knee figures with bent knees. It is probable that the bent knees were illustrating a relatively important point in the minds of the artists, because of the prominence of this feature in so many paintings. One can only assume what the significance of the bent knees might be, but a likely explanation would be that the people portrayed are dancing or jumping. Less likely reasons would be that the figures are depicted in the acts of falling, floating, flying, sleeping or in death. The occurrence of elaborate body adornment and lack of spears, as already mentioned, renders it likely that these figures are painted in the act of performing a ceremonial dance or ritual.

Headdress types. While 14% (46% uncertain) of tasselled figures have a knobbed end to their headdresses (Figs 2, 3, 5), 51% (26% uncertain) of the bent knee figures have a knobbed end which is often much larger (Figs 18, 29, 30, 32). A pendant from this knobbed section

was seen in 34% of bent knee figures, while tasselled figures have a smaller pendant in 4%. A hair bun tucked at the back of the head was seen in 6% of bent knee figures (Figs 24, 34). This hair bun is probably what appears in the frontal view as lateral swellings on both tasselled (Fig. 9) and bent knee figures.

Feathers. Projections which may represent feathers appear on 7% of tasselled figures and 24% of bent knee figures. In some cases an obvious feather is depicted (Fig. 33), which is a feature found on the Mitchell Plateau. Other paintings which may be contemporaneous with bent knee figures feature huge headdresses with a single feather projecting (Fig. 35).

Fly whisks. An object that appears to be made up of strands is seen hanging under the arm of Figures 20-22, and this is often carried in addition to a triangular-shaped object, possibly a dilly bag. The human figure in Figure 28 carries what appears to be a fly whisk, and it is possible that other, simpler objects also represent fly whisks.

Dilly bags/fans. Triangular objects are often hanging under the arm as well as being held (Figs 20, 21). One cannot be certain whether these all represent dilly bags or whether some may represent fans.

Thick forearms. In some sub-groups of bent knee figures the forearms are much wider than the upper arms (Figs 20-22, 24, 26). Sometimes a definite knobbed appearance can be seen, and this could represent multiple bracelets or bands. A clue to the exact meaning is found in Figure 23, where a row of individual dashes across the forearm of a bent knee figure appears to represent individual bracelets.

Upper arm protuberance. This object is often rounded and does not appear to be a feather, or of a naturally occurring shape. It may have been fashioned into this shape from fur or some other lightweight material because it almost always points upwards. A similar object worn by New Guinean natives consists of feathers wrapped up in long leaves and appears in early photographs (Miller 1950: 33). It was mentioned above that Figure 12 represents the only tasselled figure known with an object of this shape, located at the elbows. However, bent knee figures usually have this decoration positioned as if it were kept in place by an arm band or string tied to the upper arm between the elbow and the axilla. In those examples where it is high in the axilla, the protuberance is attached at the shoulder (Figs 21, 30) and I have described this using the term 'epaulet' in the past. There can be little doubt that the object depicted is tied at the upper arm, and a term such as 'upper arm protuberance' or 'upper arm decoration' is to be preferred.

Other armlets which project out in a similar fashion are still worn by Aboriginal women on Melville and Bathurst Islands during mourning ceremonies (Spencer 1912). These armlets are made from bark, woven with bush string, decorated with small feathers and painted.

Bent knee figures: regional variations and sub-groups

Different types of bent knee figures occur within each area of study. For example, Figure 26 with thick forearms and Figure 27 with thin forearms occur within 400 m of each other. Figure 22 in the embellished form is located next to another rockshelter that contains a simple form similar to that shown in Figure 18 and illustrated in Crawford (1977: 358). Different examples near Kalumburu are illustrated.

One form of bent knee figure has two large wings projecting from the front of the head. These were first described by Schmiechen as 'winged Bradshaws' at the First AURA Congress, in 1988, and he has found them concentrated in a northern section of the Drysdale River (Schmiechen 1992). Further examples of this head projection have now been found 160 km to the south (Fig. 27) and 80 km to the north-east (Fig. 28). Bradshaw (1892: 99), one of the first Europeans in the area, saw an Aboriginal in the distance with 'two huge appendages extending upwards and obliquely outwards from the top of his head, about 3 ft long; but whether they were made from the wings of a large bird, or were pieces of bark we could not ascertain'. An identical paired wing arrangement is occasionally used today by New Guinea Highlanders. There, it is the large white wings of the heron or egret that are worn (O'Hanlon 1989: 142, and Pl. 14). The projections seen in Figures 18, 21, 24 and 30 may be stylised versions of this wing arrangement, or could represent some other decoration such as a twig or small feather.

One major regional variation identified in the bent knee figures occurs on the Mitchell Plateau. Here, two features not yet seen elsewhere occur: the existence of a single large feather from the front of the headdress (Figs 32, 33), and the existence of bichrome forms. Figure 34 is from a panel on the Mitchell River. A gap is seen at the waist, and faded brownish pigment, shown speckled, reveals the body adornments usually seen with bent knee figures. Although it is possible that some of these 'extras' may have been added later, another example, shown in Figure 32, is also consistent with the paintings having been originally bichrome.

Bent knee figures have approximately the same distribution as the tasselled figures, but have not yet been identified as far south as the Isdell River, nor further east than Jack's Waterhole.

Further discussion

Tasselled and bent knee figures of early Kimberley rock art give us an enormous insight into the material culture of the early Australians. In Figure 8, two people hold containers of some kind. The detail on the lower right figure includes a splayed neck on that container, which raises the possibility that this represents a water container. There is no evidence that pottery was used in prehistoric times in Australia, but bark containers lined with beeswax, or tree or spinifex resin, were used in historic times to carry water. A dilly bag with a splayed neck similar to the example seen here was collected in 1912 from western Arnhem Land (Isaacs 1984: 123), but it was not lined with waterproofing. Thus the painting probably depicts the earliest known example of one of these unusual splayed neck bags.

Dilly bags were not made in the northern Kimberley region in historic times. Instead, bark was used to make various containers, including a small paperbark wallet used to carry stone knives, spearheads and ochre, and which was tied up with boab string and carried in a man's hair (Blundell 1976: 434). Yet many of the early human figures carry what appear to be dilly bags. This indicates one aspect of a cultural change over time for this area of Australia.

Much of the ornamentation featured in these early paintings is found not just on Australian Aborigines, but also on the people of New Guinea this century. As well as the examples already cited, this includes leaf tassels

attached to the armllets seen on tasselled figures, and the various forms of plumed headdresses seen on both groups of paintings. There were no doubt close cultural links between the two areas in the past. Once dates are established for this art there will be implications about what people wore and did, thousands or tens of thousands of years ago, not just in Australia, but further north with links into Asia.

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Résumé. Cet article décrit les peintures d'anthropomorphes les plus anciennes survivant dans la région du Kimberley en Australie occidentale. Ces peintures se manifestent sous forme de taches d'ocre liées à la roche de grès siliceux, et la plupart survivent en formes 'naturalistiques' monochromes. On peut distinguer au moins deux groupes essentiels provisoires de ces motifs humains. Ces deux groupes, 'figures avec pompons' et 'figures aux genoux fléchis', sont discutés en détail.

Zusammenfassung. Dieser Bericht beschreibt die ältesten überlebenden Malereien von Anthropomorphen im Kimberley Gebiet von Westaustralien. Die Malereien erscheinen als in den Quarzsandstein gebundene Ockerflecken, und die meisten sind als monochrome 'naturalistische' Formen erhalten. Aus diesen menschlichen Figuren treten zumindest zwei provisorische Hauptgruppen hervor. Diese zwei Gruppen, 'Figuren mit Quasten' und 'Figuren mit abgewinkeltem Knie', werden hier in Einzelheiten beschrieben.

Resumen. Este artículo describe las más antiguas pinturas sobrevivientes de figuras antropomorfas en la región Kimberley de Australia Occidental. Estas pinturas se manifiestan como manchas de ocre unidas a roca arenisca de cuarzo, y la mayoría de ellas sobrevive como formas monocromas 'naturalistas'. De estas figuras humanas, por lo menos dos principales grupos tentativos emergen. Estos dos grupos, 'figuras adornadas con borlas' y 'figuras con las rodillas dobladas', son examinadas en detalle.

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Figure 2. Red tasselled figures with wands, skirts and bracelets. Large figure 79 cm (note: Fig. 1 is on front cover).

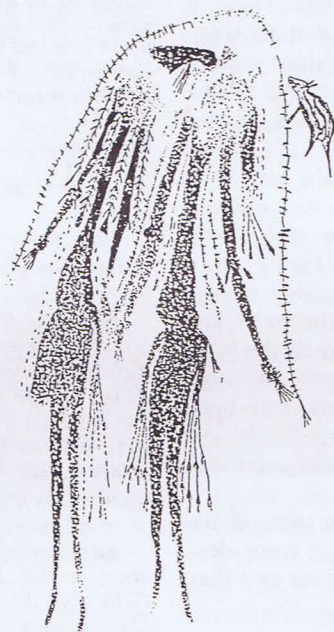


Figure 3. Tasselled figures with associated animals, dark red. Left figure 90 cm.



Figure 4. Tasselled figures, red, repainted head and arms on left figure and repainted legs on both figures. Right figure 41 cm tall. Manning Creek.

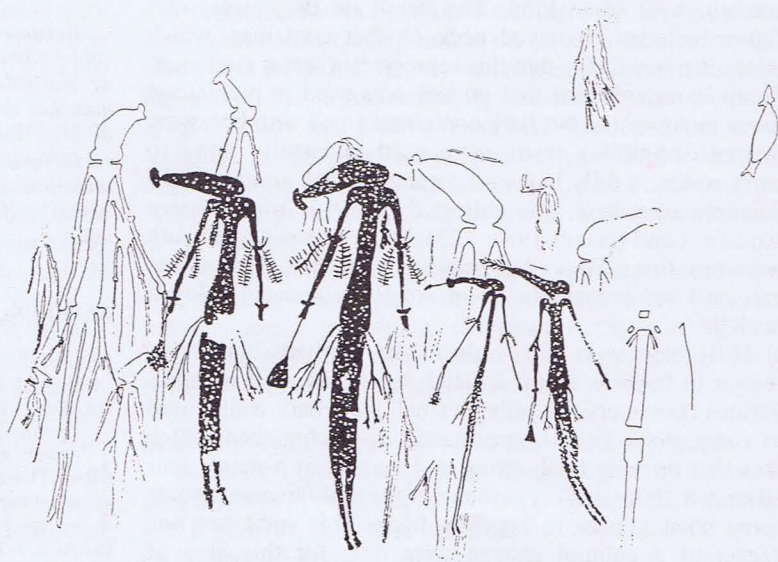


Figure 5. Orange figures (shown in thin outline) holding strings, brownish figures (shown infilled) holding dilly bags. The figure at right was added later, with straight parts and missing pigment. Central infill figure 120 cm. King George River.

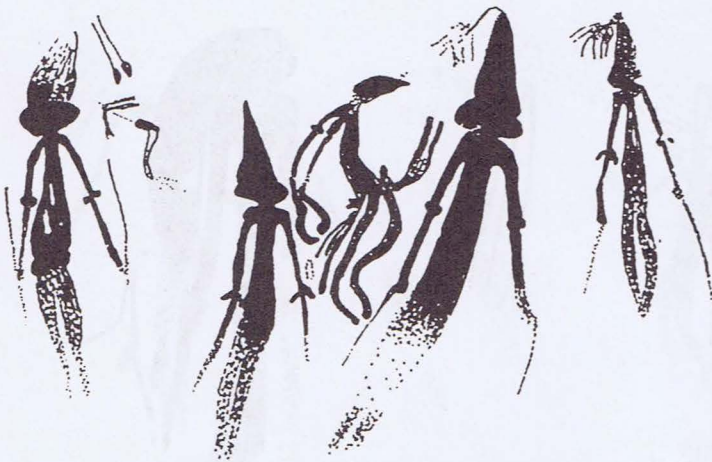


Figure 6. Orange tasselled figures with strings and a variant form in the centre. Tallest figure approximately 50 cm. An object at the left may be an axe. King George River.



Figure 10. A tasselled figure, 52 cm tall, holding objects resembling branches with berries. Kalumburu.

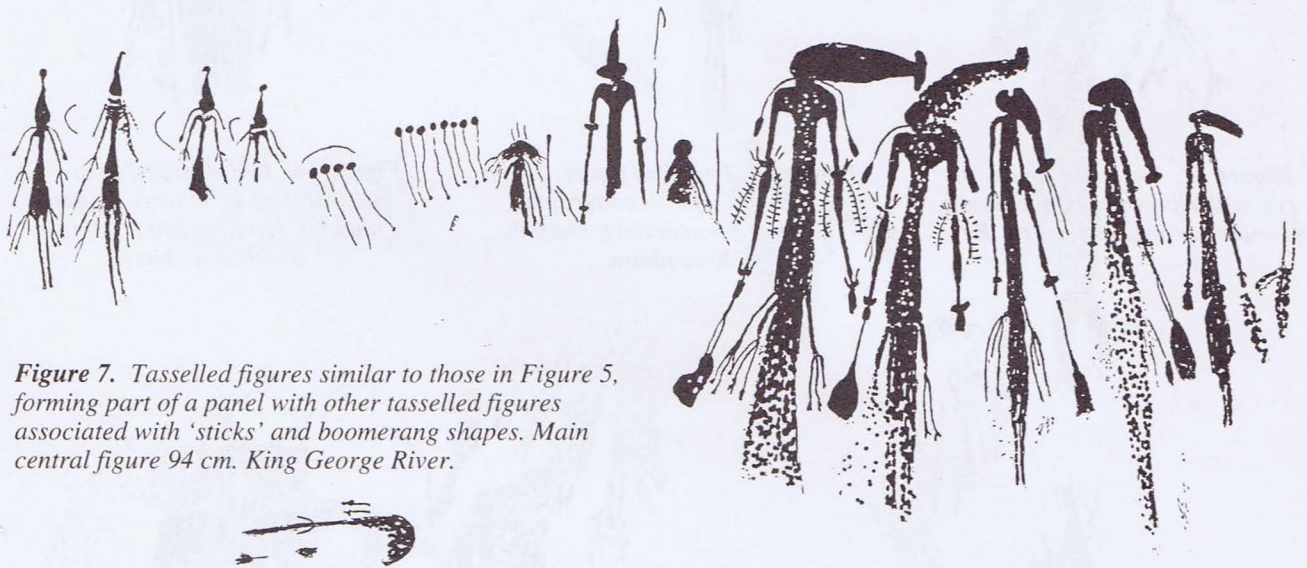


Figure 7. Tasselled figures similar to those in Figure 5, forming part of a panel with other tasselled figures associated with 'sticks' and boomerang shapes. Main central figure 94 cm. King George River.



Figure 9. Stylised tasselled figures with boomerangs, sticks and a speared macropod. Centre figure 54 cm, brown-black. Mitchell Plateau (note: Fig. 8 is on back cover).

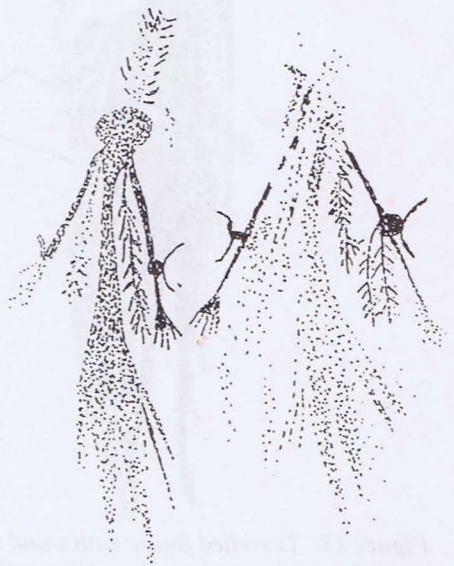


Figure 11. Tasselled figures, 45 cm tall, red.



Figure 12. Tasselled figure, 61 cm, with elbow projection, small boomerangs and a stick, red. Pago.



Figure 13. Tasselled figure, 33 cm, with graceful shoulder line, holding a boomerang, reddish. Kalumburu.



Figure 14. Red tasselled figure, 52 cm, featuring headdress, pectoral muscles, hip line, and holding a weathered object.

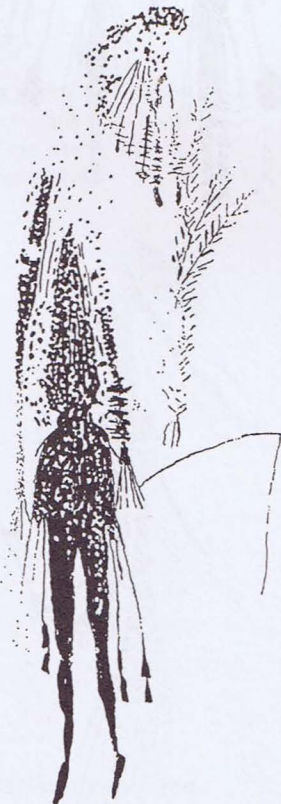


Figure 15. Tasselled figure with wand and string, plant decoration and wrist bracelets, 60 cm tall. Weathered half red, half blackish.



Figure 16. Red tasselled figures with bent knees and holding boomerangs. Central figure 40 cm tall.



Figure 17. Left figure is mulberry-black, 36 cm tall, faded figures at right are red-brown. Kununurra.

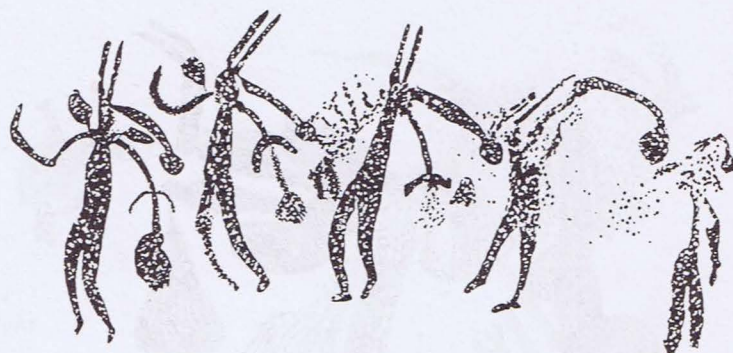


Figure 18. Bent knee figures without waist appendages, light mulberry colour. Left figure 36 cm tall. King Edward River Crossing.



Figure 19. Bent knee figures, mulberry, left 18 cm tall. Right figure with crossed legs, 20 cm. Pago.



Figure 20. Figure with boomerangs, fly whisk, bags/fan, and waist appendage, mulberry. Feet are prominent, possibly retouched. Approximately 40 cm tall.



Figure 21. Bent knee figure, 54 cm, with three-point skirt, mulberry.



Figure 22. Elaborate bent knee figures, right figure 125 cm tall, with embellished skirts and arm projections, thick forearms, boomerangs, in mulberry colour.



Figure 23. Bent knee figure showing 'bracelets' on forearm, blackish. Mount Elizabeth Station.



Figure 24. Profile of face, hair bun and head projections, 31 cm, brown. Note thick forearms, fly whisk and headdress pendant.



Figure 25. The lower parts of two bent knee figures, blackish, and red figures with wide skirts superimposed. The headdress of the larger figure, 84 cm tall, is at top right. For details of the smaller figures, see Figure 36.



Figure 26. Bent knee figure, 40 cm, at left with thick forearms. The figure at the right appears to have a slight gap at the waist. Mulberry colour.



Figure 28. Winged head projections and detailed feet, 50 cm tall, mulberry to brown. King George River.



Figure 27. Bent knee figure with fly whisk and winged head projections, 58 cm tall, dark brown.

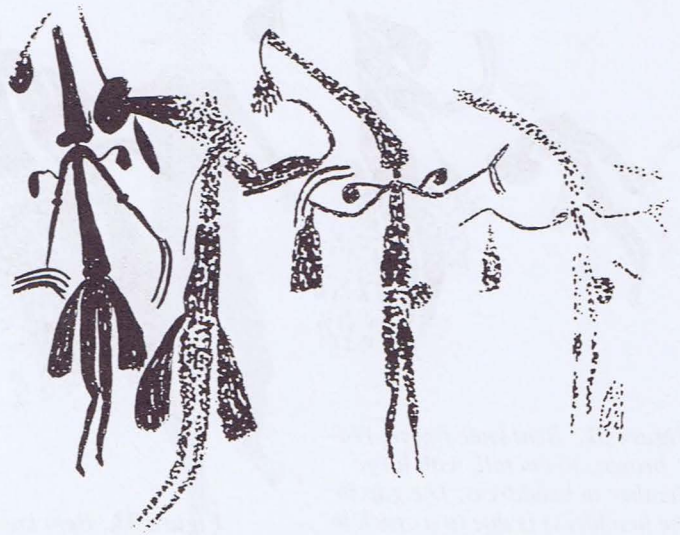
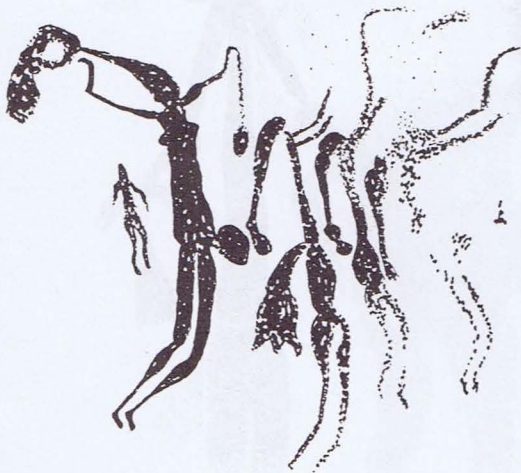


Figure 29. Dark brown composition, main figure on left 43 cm tall. King George River.



Figure 30. Part of a panel of bent knee figures, mulberry. The figure at right appears to have hands on hips. The figure at left, 60 cm tall, has an unusually long skirt. Pago.

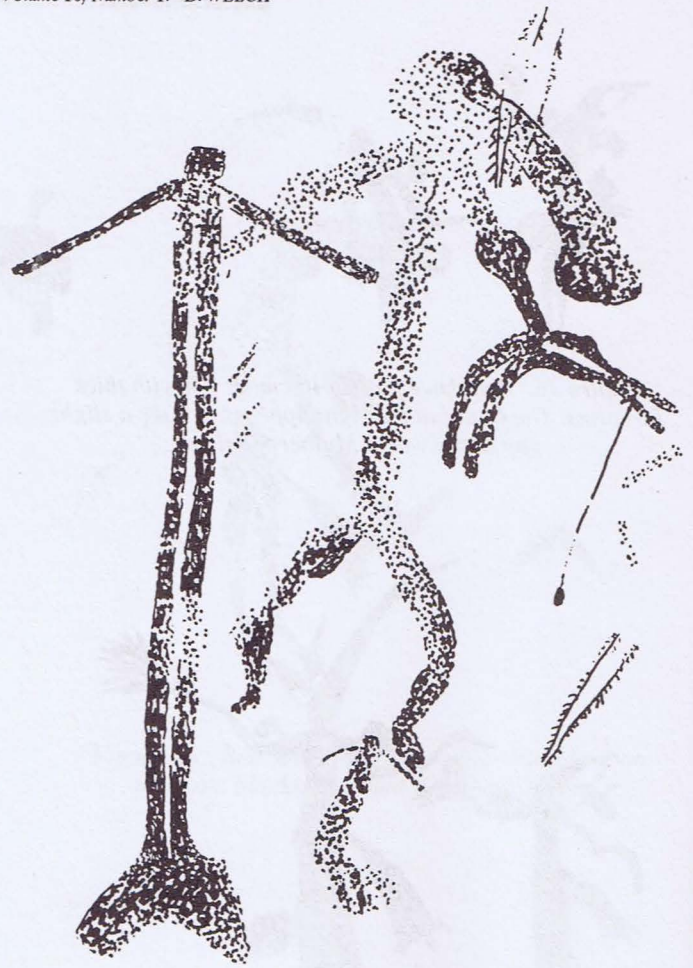


Figure 31. Figure with boomerangs on the right, 37 cm tall and in mulberry pigment, is painted over by brown figures with straight parts and missing pigment. A hooked stick and spear ends are in the latter colour. Pago.



Figure 32. Bent knee figure, red-brown, 56 cm tall, with large feather in headdress. The gap in the headdress is due to a crack in the rock. Smaller figure in bichrome. Mitchell River.



Figure 33. Bent knee figure with large feather. Length of larger boomerang 15 cm. Mitchell River.



Figure 34. Dark red-brown figure with gap in waist and stippled areas in pale brown, 42 cm tall. Mitchell River.

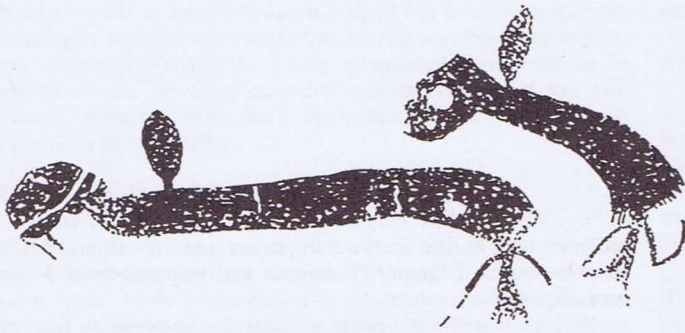


Figure 35. Stylised figures with large headdresses and feather projections, red-brown. Headdress of left figure is 56 cm long. Little Mertons Falls.



Figure 37. Mulberry-coloured figure, 52 cm tall, with hooked stick and skirts. Pago.



Figure 36. Detail of the red figures in full skirts seen in Figure 25.

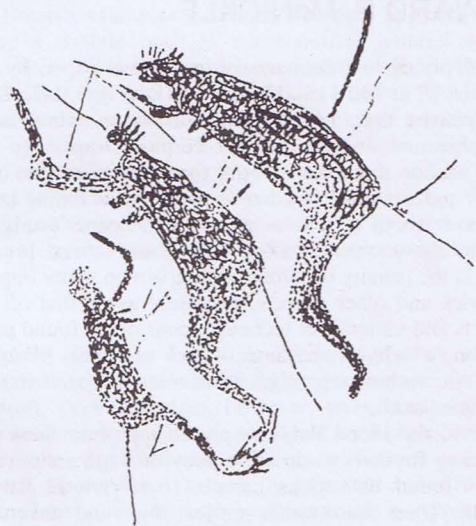


Figure 38. Female figures with lines about and at posterior ends, approximately 50 cm tall, in mulberry. Mitchell River.

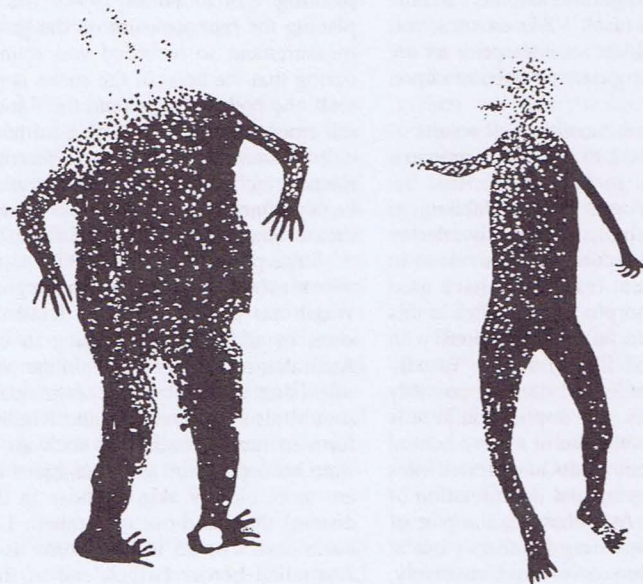


Figure 39. The left figure is blackish, 150 cm tall, from King Edward River. The right figure is dark red, 280 cm tall, from Mitchell River.