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## LARGE ANIMALS AND SMALL HUMANS IN THE ROCK ART OF NORTHERN AUSTRALIA

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**Abstract.** Paintings of large, life-size animals feature throughout northern Australian rock art, while associated human figures are often quite small in comparison. It will be shown that such a convention has existed from the earliest surviving rock art to the latest, and the answers to its significance lie in the study of current concepts in Aboriginal belief in Arnhem Land, the Northern Territory. These paintings give us insights into Aborigines' ecological knowledge and religious perspective in relation to animals and the association between animals and humans. Animals are often painted large either because of their importance, or because they represent an Ancestral Creator. Taking examples from both rock art and north Australian traditional Aboriginal bark paintings, it will be shown why there is such a strong connection between large animal and small human figures, both in rock art and in the minds of the original artists. In addition to this, an important art style I have called a '*combined perspective*' is recognised amongst some human and animal motifs.

### Introduction

While many paintings in northern Australian rock art may appear to consist of just human figures or just animal or plant figures, compositions of humans with plants and animals also exist. Amongst these compositions, the size of different motifs in relation to each other sometimes matches that found in nature, and some animal with human compositions have the animals in normal proportions to the size of the human motifs. However, this is not always the case.

This paper illustrates an intriguing art tradition consisting of the *association of large animals with small humans*. Evidence from rock art in the Kimberley and Kakadu/Arnhem Land regions reveals that this tradition spans thousands of years, and continues to this day in Aboriginal art painted and drawn on bark paintings from western Arnhem Land. What perceptions of the environment have led artists, through so many generations, to create paintings in this way? Much of the earliest surviving art of northern Australia consists of large, life-sized animals while at the same time many shelters contain images of smaller human figures. Only occasionally are the two brought together in definite compositions, as will be shown here. What do paintings of large animals associated with smaller human figures tell us about the artists who created them? For what reason were they painted?

Sometimes one gains the impression that, for both the Kimberley and Kakadu/Arnhem Land regions, large naturalistic animals were painted before smaller human figures. This is because many ancient paintings of large animals are painted without associated human figures. It is also difficult, when faced with rock art panels covered in over-painting, to determine which animals might be painted with

which human figures. However, many clear examples of the combination of large, relatively naturalistic animals and smaller human figures occur and some have been published.

This paper analyses some Kimberley sites where the same artist has apparently created the large animals and the smaller humans. Through the discussion, we will first look at the rock art examples, and then compare these to present-day Aboriginal art and knowledge, and then conclude the findings.

The measurements with the illustrations refer to their height.

### 1. (a) Hunting scenes in rock art

By 'hunting scenes' I refer to examples where a human figure clearly launches a spear into the animal. Many Australian rock art scenes have been referred to as 'hunting scenes' just because a human figure with a spear or club is beside an animal. Those 'scenes' are discussed later.

Figure 1 represents an old, red Kimberley painting depicting a human figure with a spear thrown by hand (not using a spearthrower) at a male macropod (kangaroo or wallaby). The rock surface is irregular, resulting in the spear appearing bent. The human figure also holds what may be sticks, spears or batons. The largest kangaroos grow to the size of a man, so it can be seen that the macropod is depicted disproportionately larger than the human figure in this case. Should we make anything of this? Other similar compositions in the rock art show correctly proportioned humans and macropods. Perhaps the occasional artist painted his animal larger than the human for no particular reason.

In the example of the 'man spearing emu' scene on Mount Brockman, Kakadu National Park, in the Northern

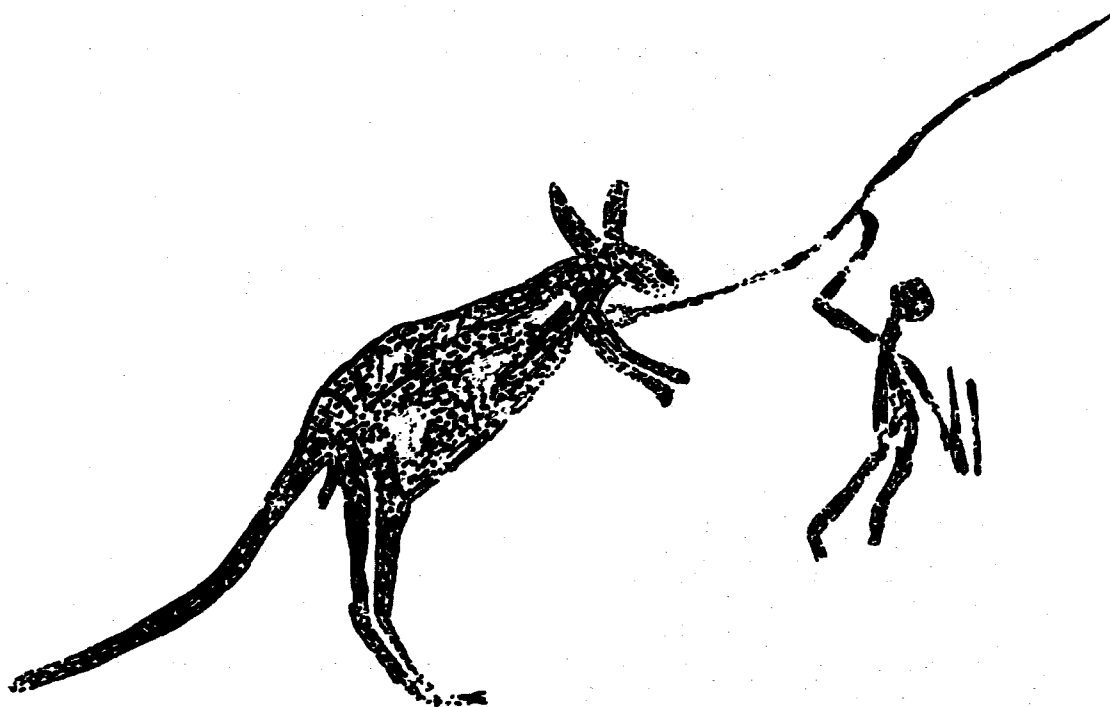


Figure 1. Spearing a macropod (kangaroo or wallaby), 32 cm.

Territory (Chaloupka 1993: 108), a human figure with large headdress hides behind a bundle of grass or sticks he holds and throws his spear, hitting a large emu. The emu is about two to three times the size of the hunter, whereas in real life an emu is about the same height as an adult human. The human figure in this example belongs to the type described by Chaloupka as a *dynamic figure*, and the animal has large, naturalistic features.

Other hunting scene examples from Kakadu include a stick human figure spearing a larger, naturalistically painted echidna, a stick figure spearing a large, naturalistic macropod, several stick figures spearing a large macropod, and another, more recent painting of a small human figure spearing a large macropod (Lewis 1988: 241, 245, 332, 397).

### 1. (b) Hunting scenes in contemporary Aboriginal art

In relation to the relatively larger and naturalistic depiction of animals compared to their human counterparts mentioned above, an excellent art source for a comparative study is the bark paintings by Aboriginal artists of western Arnhem Land. These have been collected and documented since 1878 and many show the combination of animals painted several times larger than accompanying human figures. Published examples of a smaller human spearing a larger macropod appear in almost every book on contemporary bark paintings, including those by the Aboriginal Arts Board (1979: 93, 95, 96, 114) and West (1995: 13, 38). The animal figure is disproportionately larger than the human figure in almost every bark painting of a hunting scene from western Arnhem Land.

One Aboriginal bark painting from Oenpelli in Western Arnhem Land depicts a *mimi* (ancestral human figure) spearing a kangaroo three times its size (Aboriginal Arts Board 1979: 96). The artist, Jimmy Nakkurridjilmi Nganj-

mira, is said to have always painted the *mimi* hunter disproportionately small to indicate his distance from the kangaroo he was hunting.

However, many Aboriginal artists give another explanation as to the reason for the relatively larger animals in their bark paintings. This is that *the animal represents an important totem, or ancestral figure to the artist concerned*. Dorothy Bennett, who has collected directly from traditional Aboriginal artists across Arnhem Land and dealt with barks and artefacts since 1955, has told me she used to often ask why the animals were depicted larger than people and this was always the reason given. In many cases the animal portrayed was felt to be so closely a part of the artist that he would refer to the painted image of the kangaroo, goanna (a large Australian lizard), bird or whatever as actually being his father or his brother. This is because in Aboriginal belief animals, plants and sometimes other entities, once took on a human form in the Creation Period. Similarly, when a person dies, they will be reincarnated as an animal or another person. Each artist painted only certain animals, plants or objects which were the totems belonging to him.

Aborigines also told George Chaloupka (pers. comm.) that in relation to animal and human figures, both in rock art and on bark paintings, *the animals were painted larger because they were more important*. He was told that in the case of apparent hunting scenes, the artists were simply depicting hunting scenes and the kangaroo was larger because it was more important than the hunter was. He noted that some animals, such as the kangaroo, are painted on traditional barks by many different artists, irrespective of whether the kangaroo is their particular totemic ancestor.

In some examples of hunting scenes, there may be different levels of meaning behind a painting. On the one hand, they are said to represent simple hunting scenes, while at

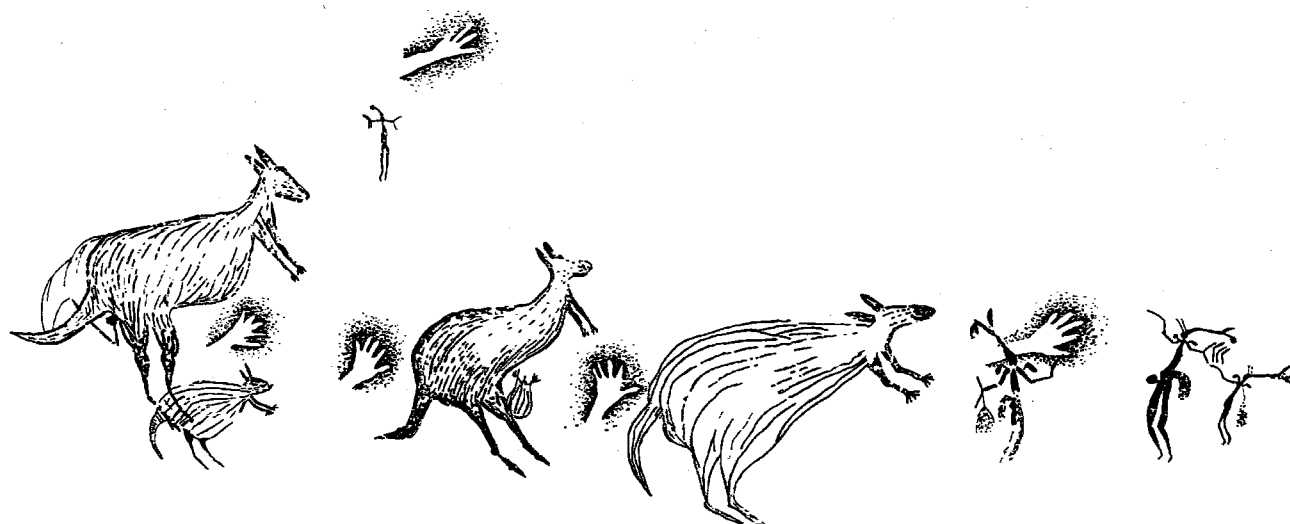


Figure 2. Macropods, hand stencils and dancing human figures.

another level some barks are didactic or spiritual paintings showing, in the cases from western Arnhem Land, the mythical *mimi* (or *mimih*) spirits hunting ancestral animals. These *mimi* spirits are said to be shy, very thin, and live in the rock crevices in the region. They taught Aboriginal people how to hunt, gather food, and cook in the correct way, but they are generally depicted as small human figures when painted on barks. So, rather than the animals being large in the minds of the artists, the artists may be depicting the *mimi* (human figures) smaller in relation to the animals they hunt.

While this gives us an insight into the rock art, it must be said that at the same time, the presence of the earlier rock art has created a template from which present-day artists can draw inspiration, both spiritually and artistically. The very belief of *mimi spirits* in the western Arnhem Land mythology is derived from the existence of the ancient rock art with small red human figures. It is a belief, which has evolved to explain the existence of the earlier rock art. To quote Nawakadj (Bobby) Nganjmirra (1997: 90):

We never made any paintings of *Mimih*. They painted themselves on the rock, only in red colour, the old way. There is a big mob of *Mimih* paintings everywhere in my country. The *Mimih* taught us about making our songs and dancing a long time ago. They showed us how to hunt kangaroo. Some old people painted the *Mimih* hunting kangaroo. It is the same today, no different.

In this way, an artistic 'style' developed and artists painted this way because it had become the tradition.

## 2. (a) Large animals with small, dancing human figures in rock art

The following five rock art examples are all human *bent knee figures* from the Kimberley associated with disproportionately larger animals. These human figures have previously been shown to be wearing ceremonial attire (Welch 1996) and their bent knees are the depiction of a dance position (Welch 1997). When I have asked local Aborigines about these paintings, they have not known why the animals are depicted so much larger than the associated people are.

Figure 2 is drawn from a large panel, eight metres wide, beside the King George River near the northern coast. A photograph of the far left portion of this panel, including the small human figure above, has been published by Grahame Walsh (1994: 99). By my observation, the animal and human figures survive with identical pigment residues and weathering, appearing as one composition. An obvious feature of this is that the animal figures are painted disproportionately larger than the human ones. The kangaroos range in size from about 1 to 2 m while the human figures range from about 30 to 60 cm in size. In addition to the same pigment, both animal and human figures have a distinctive 'twisted perspective' or 'combined perspective' where the artist has changed perspectives within the one painting in order to feature aspects of the subjects. Each macropod is painted as if the head, body and tail are profile (sideways) while each fore and hind limb is shown separately, leaving the body as if in a more frontal view. The legs and paws appear in full profile again. While the head shape is sideways, the ears are separated as if seen from the front. This part-profile, part-frontal view is repeated in the depiction of the human figures where we see the head, headdress, stomach paunch and leg musculature in side view, but the arms with protruding upper armbands, hands holding boomerangs and waist girdle/crotch are depicted in frontal view. The artistic perspective of the animals matches the human figures and both are painted in a generally naturalistic style.

This style, using combined perspective, is also featured in early Egyptian art, and this has resulted in speculation of a connection between the two cultures or regions. It is not impossible for people with common origins to have influenced the development of art in the two regions, with the connection through Asia. However, the two cultures were vastly different at the time of the art, and the style may have developed ten to twenty thousand years ago in Australia, and five thousand years ago in Egypt. Presumably, there is an innate imprint in mankind that has allowed similar styles to evolve in two different regions of the world, at different times, and there are occasional examples of this

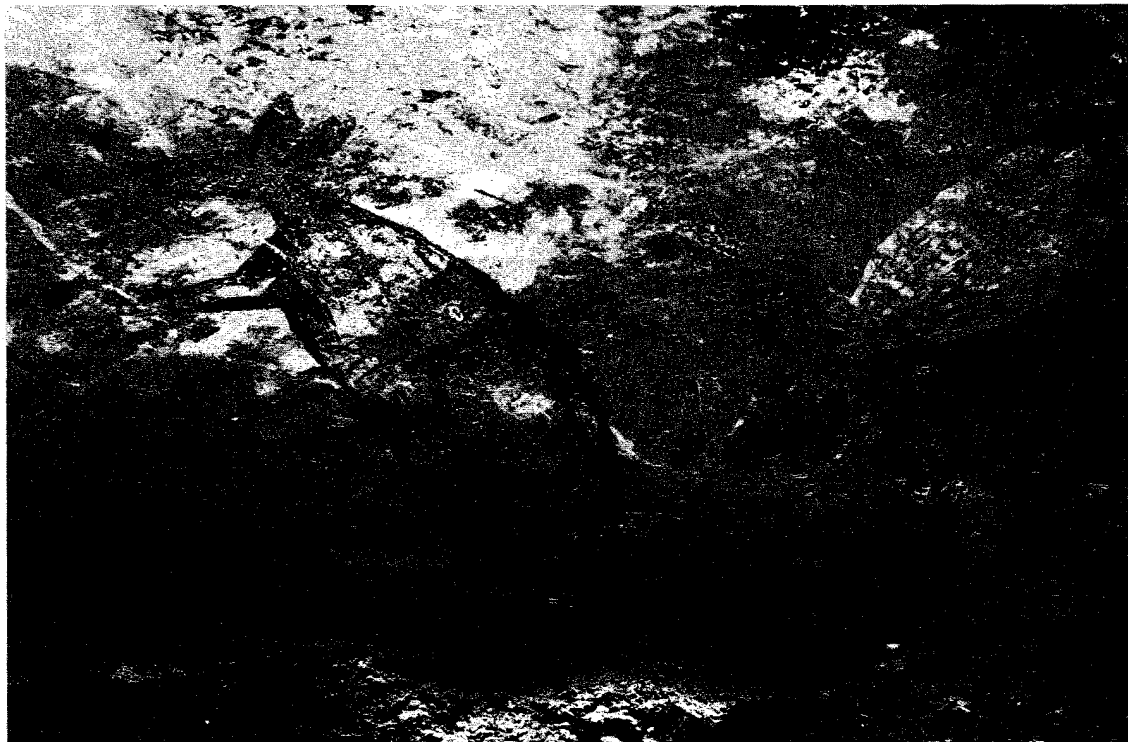


Figure 3. Macropod, 140 cm, hand stencils and dancing human figure, 39 cm.

in world art from other regions.

Another term for this artistic style is '*diagrammatic*'; the artist is revealing details of his subjects in an almost diagrammatic way. Carol Patterson suggested this term when this paper was presented at the 2000 Alice Springs rock art congress. I prefer to use the term 'combined perspective' as this correctly describes what the artist is achieving, rather than the term 'twisted perspective', which conjures up ideas of torsion and oddity.

Pigment has been applied in full colour (full infill) on the smaller human figures, but has been economised on the larger animals where irregular lines are used as body infill. The outer portions of the macropods, the head, limbs and tail appear to be painted in full colour, but sometimes close lines on old paintings can weather and blur together and give the appearance of a solid colour, making it difficult to be certain how the pigment was originally applied.

The animals in Figure 2 have been deliberately hit or pounded with a rock, especially around the head area. This has chipped away rock and pigment, making it difficult to determine whether an infill of solid colour or lines was used. This pounding of rock art is a phenomenon I have seen across northern Australian rock art sites and may have been part of ritual activity in the past. It is not European vandalism.

There is an extraordinary similarity of style between the macropods seen here and some found in Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory. One of the previously mentioned Kakadu examples (Lewis 1988: 332) shows a macropod, also with this combined perspective and peripheral colour infill. This is just another of many examples showing there were close cultural connections between the two regions in the past.

There is also an unusual small animal beside the third

macropod from the left in Figure 2, which may represent an echidna, an interesting addition to the composition. Hand stencils appearing in this shelter have a distinct red pigment residue, similar to hand stencils appearing in other shelters with the same combination of these large, naturalistic animals with bent knee human figures, and shown in the next example.

Figure 3 is taken from the sloping ceiling of a deep shelter above the Drysdale River in the Drysdale River National Park. The shallow nature of the shelter results in the images seen here being distorted. Again, a bent knee human figure, 39 cm tall, is painted beside a larger macropod, 140 cm, and full colour is used on the human but only on the periphery of the animal. Both paintings survive with what appear to me as identical pigment residues and weathering, and the surrounding hand stencils may be of similar age. Figures 2 and 3, painted about 80 km apart, are so similar in composition and style it appears both panels could be the work of one artist.

Figure 4 is a photograph of part of a large frieze with much over-painting located near the headwaters of the King Edward River, about 150 km south of the above examples. What appear to be the earliest paintings on this frieze are drawn out in Figure 5. The large macropod to the left appears contemporaneous with the bent knee human figures immediately to its right. It is difficult to be certain whether other human figures further to the right are also contemporaneous or have been added some time later. There is slight differential weathering across the rock face and a slight difference in artistic technique between old human figures at the left and right. The macropod shows *peripheral infill* to the head, tail and limb sections. The body has an irregular line and possibly irregular dash infill, but weathering and over-painting make this uncertain. Of the top central



Figure 4. Weathered rock panel with large macropod, 115 cm.

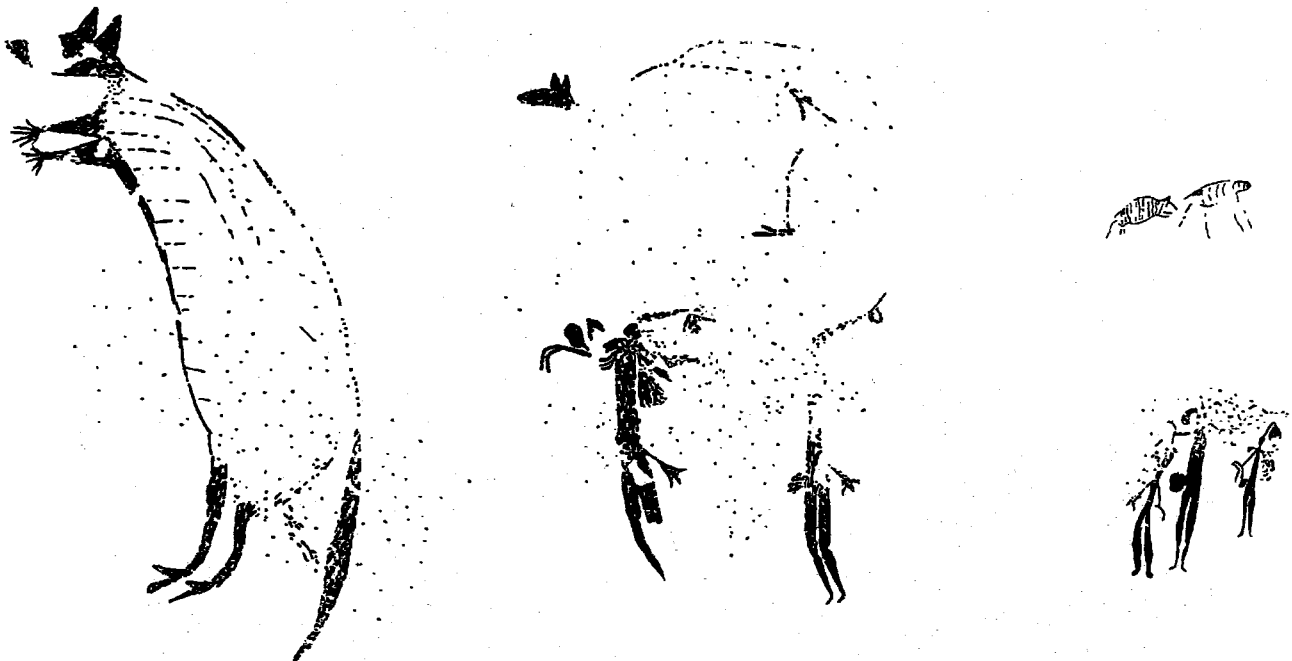


Figure 5. Drawing of Figure 4.

animal only the head, painted in solid infill remains obvious. This panel gives a further example where a macropod appears to have formed an important association with human figures dressed in 'ceremonial regalia'.

Birds may also be associated with bent knee figures and Figure 6, from the Drysdale River National Park, is part of one such frieze. Figure 7, a photograph of this section, shows how solid infill has been used for both the human figures and the faded bird. Stippling is used on the drawing to indicate weathering effects and the bird figure, bent knee figures and simple human figures to the right appear to be painted by the same artist as one composition.

The lines to the right in this drawing are three weathered boomerangs held by another bent knee figure, not shown here in full. The dumbbell-shaped object is the weathered remains of another figure. Large art panels such as this are important because they allow us to see the full repertoire of individual artists. In this case, the same artist who painted the bent knee figures and bird painted small, simple, stick-like human figures with tall 'headdresses'. The smaller human figures are holding hands as if dancing and the headdresses (*ngadari*) they wear are only worn by Australian Aborigines during times of ceremony and dance. The artist has painted them smaller than the accompanying human

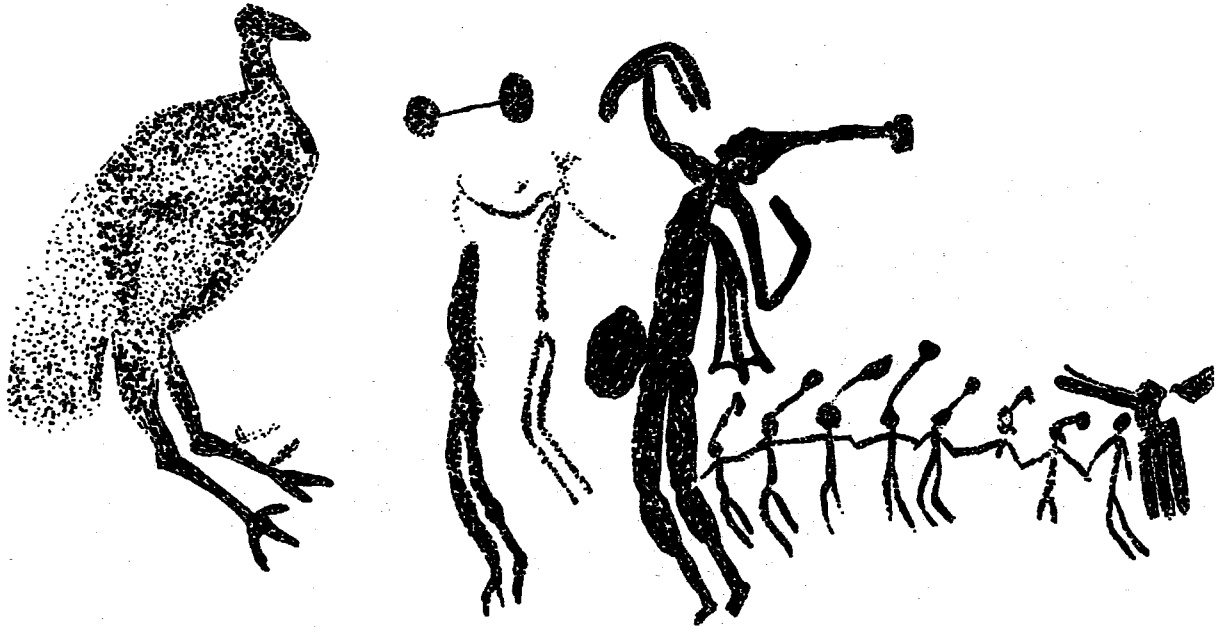


Figure 6. Drawing of Figure 7. Bird and dancing human figures, 36 cm.



Figure 7. Weathered, ancient paintings.

figure possibly as a way of indicating their distance from the main figure, or as a way of fitting extra people into the scene given the available space. It may be that the larger human figure represents a character with a more dominant role in the dance or ceremony.

Figure 8 is a single composition located in a deep recess of a cave. At the left are simple bent knee figures, in the middle a bird-like figure, and at the right is a figure with a macropod-shaped body and large bird-like beak drawn in outline. Dreamtime creatures are sometimes therianthropic, combining the qualities of human and ani-

mal forms and this figure, combining two animal forms, is likely to represent such an ancestral creator.

To summarise the features we have just seen of animal figures associated with *bent knee figures* in the Kimberley:

- (i) The animals are often painted *disproportionately larger* than the human subjects are;
- (ii) Smaller animals and humans are usually painted in full/solid colour while larger animals have only a *peripheral solid infill*, usually the head, limbs and tail;
- (iii) A *combination of perspectives* is used to highlight fea-



Figure 8. Macropod with bird beak at right. Far left human figure 24 cm.

tures of the subjects, the head and bodies mainly in profile while the shoulder girdle and waist girdle are more frontally aligned;

- (iv) *Ceremonial paraphernalia* appears on human figures, consistent with the depiction of dance or ceremony.

The difficulties associated with recognising the connection between some of these animal and human motifs has resulted in the macropods in Figures 2 and 3 being described as belonging to an earlier time in a chronological sequence than the accompanying human figures. These macropods have been previously illustrated as belonging to an 'irregular infill animal period' which predates a 'Bradshaw period' when such human figures are believed to have been painted (Morwood et al. 1994: 81-5).

## 2. (b) Large animals with small, dancing figures in contemporary Aboriginal art

Again, if one looks at the bark and paper paintings of traditional Arnhem Land Aboriginal artists through the twentieth century, examples are found where disproportionately larger animals are surrounded by one or many smaller human figures. In some examples where the human figures appear to be dancing, these paintings represent either present-day or ancestral people dancing during important ceremonies or increase rituals and the animals represent sacred ancestral beings from the *Creation Period* or *Dreamtime*. For example, Nawakadj (Bobby) Nganjmirra (Nganjmirra 1997: 130, 141) has painted scenes from the *Ubarr* and *Midjdjarn* ceremonies. In the first, *Naldumi*, the kangaroo and leader of this ceremony, is painted extremely large in relation to the surrounding people, some running, and one with raised arms. In the second, twenty-



Figure 9. Straight-part human figures superimposed on earlier paintings.



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Figure 10. Macropod, 'tree rat' and human figures, 33 cm, with 'boomerangs'.

two human figures with knees bent in a crouching position surround large fish. Also in the painting are hand stencils, just as some hand stencils appear contemporary with the large animals and dancing human figures in the rock art panels from the Kimberley discussed above.

The *Ubarr* ceremony is depicted similarly by Thompson Yulidjirri, with human figures dancing around a disproportionately large kangaroo (the ceremonial leader), lizard, snake and centipede, and accompanied by hand stencils. These animals all relate to stories depicted in the dancing (Kluge 1994: 123). This close association of large animals with smaller dancing humans in the context of initiation and sacred ceremonies is also revealed in the bark paintings by Yirawala (Le Brun Holmes 1992: Pls 54, 115) and other artists.

### 3. (a) Other small human figures associated with larger animals in rock art.

Many more rock art panels contain the combination of human and animal figures where it is not obvious, at first, if any relationship between the two exists. Differential weathering across a panel creates changes in pigment residues with the older paintings and this, combined with the fact that some animals are so large and the human figures so small, makes it difficult to be certain of any association.

Figure 9 is a photograph showing much over-painting on one Kimberley ceiling panel. Straight-part human figures in light red are painted over blackish (very dark red) figures, although this order seems reversed in the photo. Two small human figures to the right have tall 'headdresses' and hold 'boomerangs' in each hand. They survive in a blackish pigment, as do animals to their left and above. Although there is overlap of one animal's tail, it appears that the animal and human figures, drawn out in Figure 10, make one composition. The smaller animal, appearing upside down, has whiskers and a long brush tail, closely re-

sembling a tree rat, the tail having the brush at the end and lacking a broad base. Other less likely interpretations for this motif are a quoll (native cat) or a possum.

The back portion of the larger animal shows the typical hind paw of a macropod. Other features to note are the small hairs on the tail end, the penis and a testicle hanging with short lines representing hairs.

Figure 11 appears to be a single composition with fish figures at the left and human figures to the right. Both fish and human motifs appear to be amongst the earliest art on this panel. Both have irregular dash infill, the surviving (red) pigment residues appear very similar and the spacing is appropriate for a single composition. A large yam shape and other meandering lines appear to go over the top of both the human and animal motifs. However, the separation of the motifs and slight differences in appearance, possibly due to differential weathering across the rock face, can bring an element of doubt when considering this as one composition.

Many ancient red to blackish paintings, both in the Kimberley and Arnhem Land regions, consist of plants (often yams) and animals (often fish) with an irregular dash infill, similar to the fish seen in Figure 11. Most of these paintings have no associated (remaining) human figures. This situation is similar to European Palaeolithic art, where many large animals are painted with no associated human figures. This panel is particularly interesting because it reveals the human figure style of at least one artist who painted such ancient fish.

In the Kakadu/Arnhem Land region, other examples of small humans associated with larger animal figures include a dynamic figure with 'boomerang' and 'dilly bag' associated with a 'Tasmanian devil' (Chaloupka 1993: 99), and humans, including one with five 'sticks', three 'spears', a 'pick', 'headdress' and 'dilly bag' associated with larger 'fish' and a 'crocodile' (Chaloupka 1993: 131). A human figure with a 'tasselled spearthrower' appears beside a large 'goanna' (Welch 1997: 105).

If we analyse the human figures in these last examples, it appears that either their 'dress' is consistent with some kind of ceremonial attire or their body position indicates a possible dance position. The human figures in Figures 9 and 10 wear tall 'headdresses' and carry 'boomerangs' in each hand, consistent with ceremony. Those in Figure 11 are all frontally aligned. Two of the examples given here from Kakadu wear 'headdresses' and 'dilly bags' from their necks, things also worn in ceremonies. The third has a 'tasselled spearthrower', the tassels likely to be a decoration added to a plain spearthrower when it is used for a ceremony.

### 3. (b) Other small human figures associated with larger animals in contemporary art

Again, if one looks at the bark paintings produced by traditional Aborigines across Arnhem Land over the past hundred years one sees many examples where the dominant character in a story is painted larger than the others. This has been the case whether that dominant character, often a *creation/ancestral hero figure*, took on a human or



Figure 11. Irregular dash infill fish and human figures, 18 cm tall.

animal form. Generally, the paintings depicted an important story from the *Creation Period (Dreamtime)*, and traditionally only men painted these images.

Because a traditional artist paints with so many levels of meaning, it is not always possible to know whether a large animal is totemic or not. The artist may not tell you on that occasion. For example, a western Arnhem Land bark painting by Mick Kubarkku (West 1995: 21) depicts a large crocodile almost filling the entire bark. In one corner are three small human figures, while another small human figure touches a line beside the crocodile. This painting is said to depict a traditional story of a renowned Aboriginal crocodile hunter who is tying up the crocodile while his family looks on. While at one level, this represents a simple narrative, at another level, the crocodile image may also represent the specific ancestral crocodile deity. The artist has used his personal cross hatching infill style on the subjects he is painting.

### Conclusions

The association of relatively larger animals with smaller human figures in northern Australian rock art reflects several Aboriginal beliefs about humans and animals. In some instances, animals may be painted relatively larger than humans because:

1. They represent mythological *creation heroes* with enormous religious power who provide the people with their spiritual needs.
2. They represent *creation heroes* who have taught the people their everyday hunting and living skills, and help maintain tribal law and daily order.
3. The animals may be the keepers or leaders of ceremonies

with the surrounding smaller humans shown dancing during such ceremonies.

4. The animals may be larger because they are important as a food source.
5. The animals may be larger to show they are closer than the other figures and to give a sense of perspective.

Paintings where human and animal/plant figures appear together form a link between the large number of paintings of *animal-only* figures and the large number of paintings of *human-only* figures found in northern Australian rock art. On the one hand, artists may hold the perception of a strong link between humans and animals, but on the other, the art they express may show more of one form than the other. North Australian rock art contains so many thousands of galleries that we can find enough early art to reveal a continuum of art expression from animal/plant-only figures to animal/plant-with-human figures to human-only figures. Unfortunately, until there is accurate dating of many individual motifs, I do not believe it will be possible to be certain whether human or animal/plant figures appeared first in this region, if indeed one appeared before the other.

The situation in European Upper Palaeolithic art, where animal-only figures and rock art panels predominate, is also seen within certain ancient styles in north Australian rock art. Many large animal (and plant) figures, in isolation from other motifs, painted in outline with irregular dashes as infill and surviving in dark red-blackish pigment only, occur amongst the earliest art in both the Kimberley and Kakadu regions. Figure 11 is a rare example where human figures are painted with these animals. Some of the reasons for painting large animals given by today's Australian Aboriginal artists may be the same reasons why earlier art-

ists, both in Australia and in Europe, painted only certain motifs.

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Bhimbetka, World Heritage Site



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