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MATERIAL CULTURE IN KIMBERLEY ROCK ART, AUSTRALIA

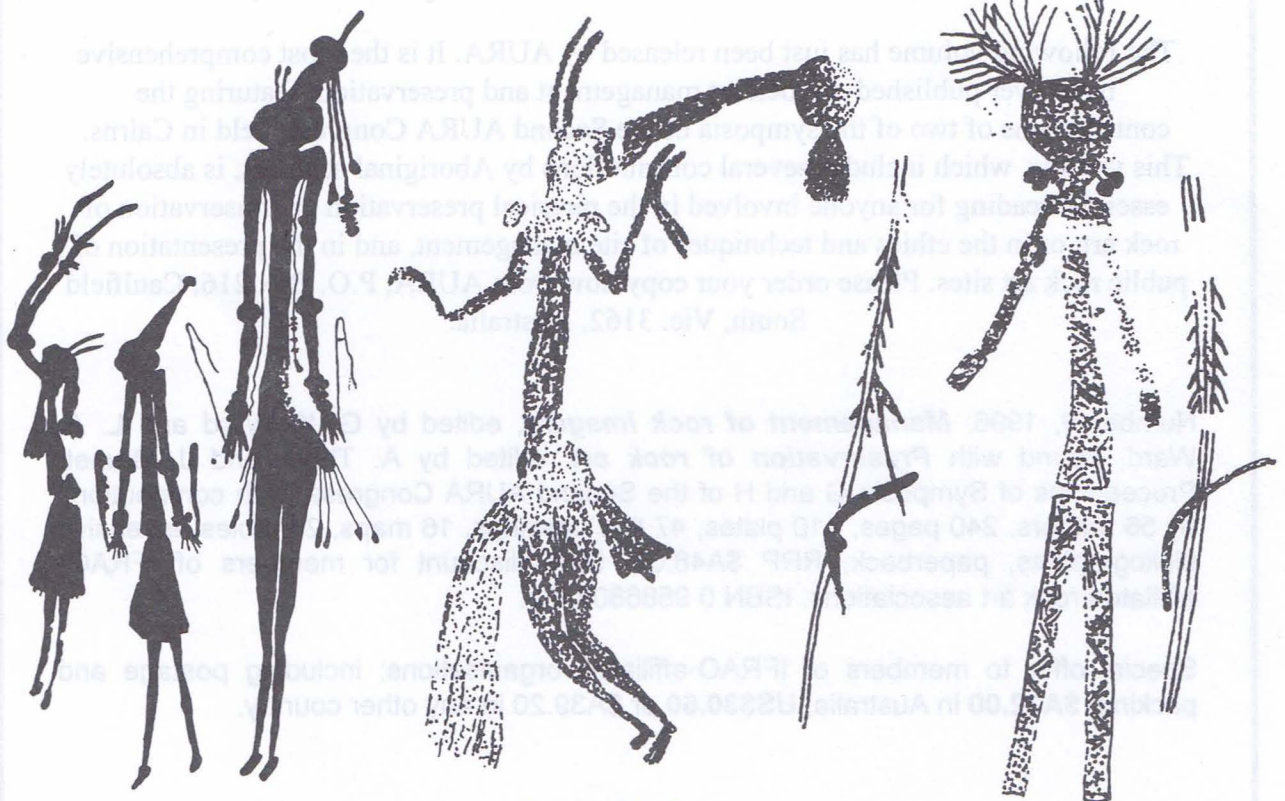
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Abstract. This paper describes items of material culture depicted in Bradshaw paintings of the Kimberley region, north-west Australia. The depicted items can be closely matched with recent examples of Aboriginal ceremonial paraphernalia in the Kimberley and elsewhere in Australia, particularly Arnhem Land. In fact, the degree of correspondence indicates that Bradshaw paintings depict people in dance and ceremony. The paper concludes that the ceremonial inventory of the early Kimberley artists exhibits strong continuity with that of recent Aboriginal peoples and that there is no need to evoke outsiders to explain the elegance of Bradshaw paintings.

Introduction

The term 'Bradshaw figures' has been used to describe the early human figures of the Kimberley region. There are, in fact, many different human forms ranging from simple stick figures to more naturalistic human figures found in the early art. The most elegant forms

depict human figures wearing large headdresses, tassels, arm and waist decorations (Welch 1990, 1993a, 1993b; Walsh 1994). Many of the most elaborate Bradshaw figures fall into one of three main groups, 'tasselled figures', 'bent knee figures' and 'straight part figures' (Figure 1).



(A) Tasselled Figure

(B) Bent Knee Figure

(C) Straight Part Figure

Figure 1. Early human figures, Kimberley.

The items depicted worn by these early human figures are not part of the day to day dress of Aborigines in historic times. The Kimberley Aborigines find much of the regalia appearing on these human figures is foreign and beyond recognition. For them, the early art has not been made by people but by other creators in *lalai* (the Dream-time). For example, people from the Wunambal and Kwini tribes in the northern Kimberley believe that all old paintings surviving as red stains on the rock were painted by Kira Kiro, a mythological bird which lived in *lalai*. In one version of the story this bird is said to have rubbed its elbows on the rock to make itself bleed and then used this blood to make the paintings (M. Pandilo, pers. comm.). Crawford (1968: 85-86) was told of similar origins for the early paintings.

Because the painting styles are different to recent Aboriginal art and the items being worn are different, some researchers have speculated upon theories of visitors and lost races of people from higher civilisations as being the creators of this art. For example, in the 1930s, before the art was better known, it was considered 'either foreigners impressed by Australian art seen at other places decided to paint portrayals of themselves upon a suitable rocky surface, or the natives, impressed by the appearances of foreigners seen in the region or along the coast, attempted to portray them as accurately as possible' (Davidson 1936: 134).

Most recently, Walsh (1994: 18, 55-63) suggests that the Bradshaw artists are another race of people and he places the elegant human figures seen in the art into an 'Erudite Epoch' which he hypothesises pre-dates an 'Aborigine Epoch'. Walsh notes that people who have dressed so elaborately must have lived in fairly good housing and have been from a higher culture which has since been lost. He states that 'The term "prehistoric" is in this case used in its true sense, for no link has been established with contemporary Aboriginal culture, and as such the paintings of the Erudite Epoch can be regarded in a purely archaeological context' (Walsh 1994: 73).

I believe such a link does exist between the early Bradshaw paintings and contemporary Aboriginal culture in at least three ways. Firstly, for many paintings, there is a continuity of a high level of artistic skill from the earliest to the latest art. For example, during the more recent Wandjina Period this takes the form of large oval and rounded shapes painted on irregular rock surfaces. Secondly, one can see the development from one art style to the next, with the most recent Wandjina figures evolving from elements of tasselled and straight part figures through a pre-Wandjina phase. Thirdly, there is the enormous amount of material cultural items seen associated with the early human figures, and here can be found the strongest link between the culture of those early artists and Aboriginal people today.

This paper provides information on the material culture associated with the early elaborate human figures (Bradshaw figures) and gives some of the Aboriginal names used by different tribes for these objects. I hope that in this way many of the questions that have been

raised about the culture of the people who have created this art will be answered. In my quest for these answers, I have collected items depicted in the art still being made traditionally by Aborigines across northern Australia, and some of these are illustrated in this paper. I will show that much of the material culture associated with the early tasselled figures and bent knee figures of the Kimberley is to be found surviving amongst the culture of the people of Arnhem Land. Here, an extremely rich, cultural heritage is still retained in the form of art, religion, stories, dance, ceremony, and ceremonial dress. In this way, one can find the answers to Walsh's questions (1994: 74) about the type of housing structure people capable of producing such paraphernalia made. For example, in the Arnhem Land region there are six different housing styles described (Warner 1958: 471-5).

Traditionally, Australian Aborigines wore no clothes during day to day activities. Their hair may have been tied up with human hair string, and sometimes various items of simple body decoration were worn. These included plaited cane (e.g. Lawyer vine) arm bands, necklaces, bracelets, nose-bones, headbands, or simple pubic tassels made of human hair string worn for decoration. For the Kimberley region, these have been described by Love (1917) and Blundell (1976). Even in central Australia where Winter night temperatures drop to zero degrees Celsius, people wore no clothes. However, in south-eastern Australia, animal furs from possum or kangaroo were sewn together and made into cloaks which were worn in Winter, and in the south-west corner of Western Australia cloaks were also made from kangaroo skin.

It is only when an important ceremony is to be undertaken that elaborate costumes are worn by Australian Aborigines. Much of the regalia seen on the early Kimberley human figures still survives in some form, seen in different parts of Australia during ceremony. It is for this reason one can be fairly certain many of the paintings were depicting people engaged in dance and ceremony. A study of the rock art reveals a remarkable continuity in this aspect of Aboriginal culture over the millennia. The following discussion will deal with each of the three main groups of elaborate human figures in turn, and then discuss some other items seen in the art.

(A) THE TASSELLED FIGURES

These paintings have a wide distribution, and there is no doubt they were painted by at least several artists of varying skills. The characteristic finding on these figures is the occurrence of tassels hanging from the waist, head-dresses, and some armbands.

(i) Feather tassel waist belt (*ngartjil*)

One of the most characteristic features of the tasselled figures is the presence of tassels appearing to hang from the waist. These appear in various combinations, sometimes with a feathered appearance and sometimes ending with different shaped 'blobs'. Aborigines from the Kimberley deny knowledge of this form of body decoration in their local culture. They are familiar with simple

belts made from human hair or kangaroo fur string and a pearl shell attachment as a waist decoration.

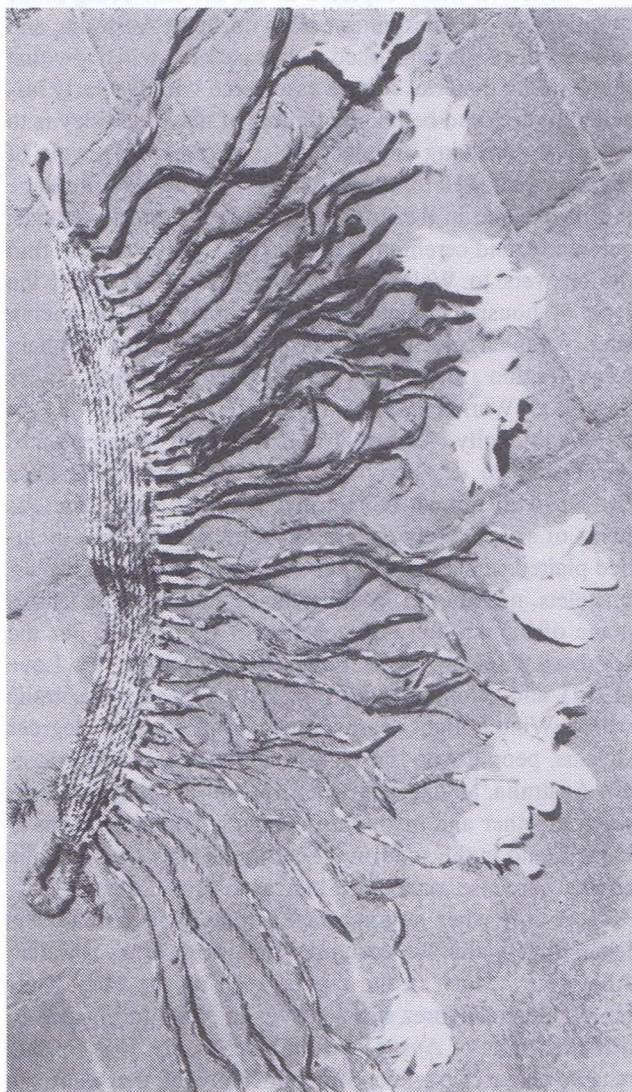


Figure 2. Tasselled belt from Maningrida, Arnhem Land.

Figure 2 shows a feather tassel waist belt from Maningrida in Arnhem Land. Bush string made from bark fibre has been woven into a belt and hanging strings. White cockatoo feathers have been woven into the hanging strings and glued on with native beeswax resin to form tassels. Beeswax resin is also used to seal the ends and ties on the string to prevent fraying. In this example every second string ends with feathers, and every other string ends with a small blob of beeswax. The use of alternate tassels of feathered and plain string seen on this artefact can be seen on some of the tasselled figures from the Kimberley rock art (e.g. Welch 1993a: Fig. 1).

Figure 3 shows another belt from the Oenpelli region of western Arnhem Land, and was worn by a boy for his initiation ceremony. It is 79 cm wide (fully extended) and the main body of the belt is formed by layers of bush string heavily coated with beeswax resin and then painted over with thick white pipe clay and red ochre dots. Feathers are attached to the bush string tassels.

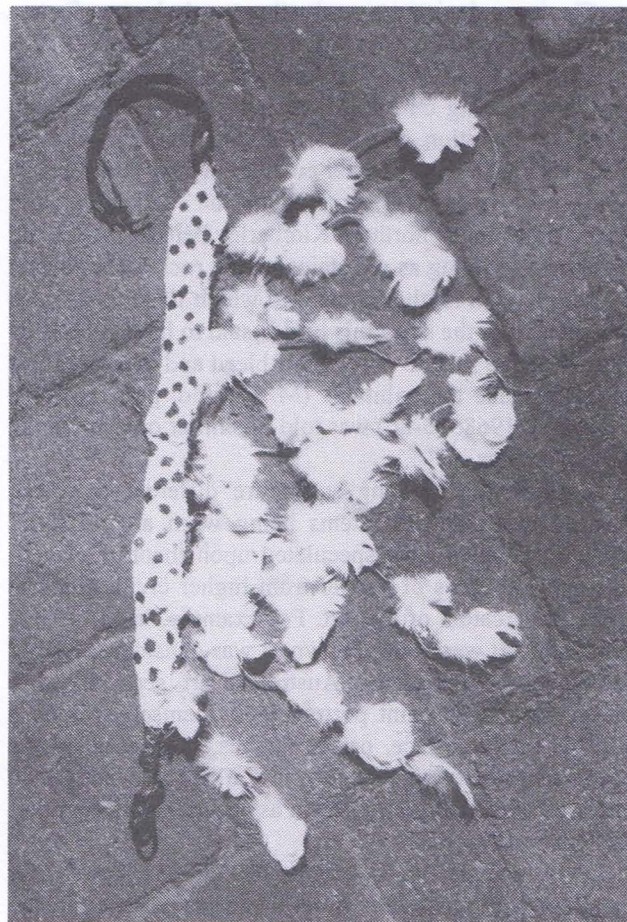


Figure 3. Tasselled belt from Oenpelli, Arnhem Land.

The feather tassel waist belt or pendant feathered belt is commonly used in ceremonies across Arnhem Land, especially in eastern Arnhem Land where it is known by the Aboriginal name, *durdi-birri* or *ngartjil*. It is worn in such ceremonies as those connected with male circumcision and mortuary ceremonies such as the morning star ceremony. Only the males wear this artefact during these ceremonies, but because of the considerable time spent in preparing such items, they are made with the combined effort of both women and men. Each clan or clan group has ownership over certain bird species so that only the feathers of specific birds are chosen to be used on the belt of each clan. More photographs of these tasselled belts appear in Isaacs (1984: 95) and one being worn at an initiation ceremony appears in Tweedie (1985: 200).

A simple form of these waist tassels is worn by members of the successful Aboriginal pop group Yothu Yindi. Mandawuy Yunupingu, the lead singer, and some of the members are from Yirrkala in eastern Arnhem Land, and they wear feather tassels when they perform. Aborigines from this part of Arnhem Land performed wearing these tassels during the closing ceremony of the recent Atlanta Olympic Games. Thus, images of the same artefact we see on the early Kimberley figures are beamed into our lounge rooms with modern pop music!

It appears the distribution of this artefact within Australia in historic times has been limited to the area of

Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory and in northern Queensland. Research into the rock art now reveals that the *ngarjil* was once widespread throughout the northern Kimberley and the knowledge which can be learned from the Arnhem Landers leads us to conclude that the tasselled figures are depicted dressed for ceremony.

(ii) Tasselled armbands (*ngainbak*)

Various armbands appear on early Kimberley human figures. The tasselled figures often feature non-tasselled bracelets around the wrists, and upper armbands located just above the elbows. These armbands often appear to have projections consistent with plant material such as leaves, twigs, or small branches, or tassels hanging down consistent with pendants made from feathers or fur.

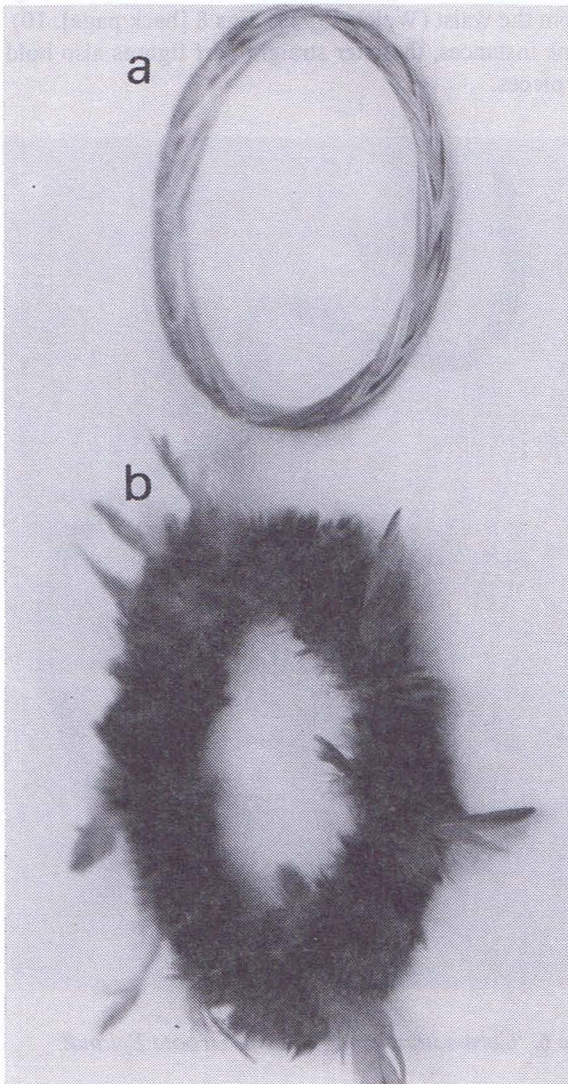


Figure 4. Ceremonial and simple armbands, Arnhem Land.

In the past, simple plaited armbands were worn during day to day activities by traditional Aborigines across Australia (Figure 4a). These lay flat against the skin and did not protrude. However, it was only during ceremonies that more elaborate armbands were worn. The one in

Figure 4b was made for a boy's initiation ceremony and has woven bird feathers of bright colours. One of the simplest ways to decorate an armband for a ceremony is to poke leaves or feathers into it, and this method is widely used in historic times. This is consistent with some of the depictions seen in the rock art.

The Aborigines from the northern Kimberley to whom I have spoken have no knowledge of the use of tasselled armbands in their culture. One informant said he knew they were used in Arnhem Land ceremonies and he thought they might be in the process of coming into the Kimberley. If we again look at the ceremonies taking place in eastern Arnhem Land we find exactly these tasselled armbands. Figure 5 shows one of the two tasselled armbands worn with the tasselled belt in Figure 2. The Aboriginal name used for this pendant feathered armband in Eastern Arnhem Land is *ngainbak*. It is predominantly the men and boys who wear this adornment at special events such as initiation and mourning ceremonies, and it can be seen worn by young boys during an initiation ceremony in eastern Arnhem Land (Tweedie 1985: 114-9, 210-4).

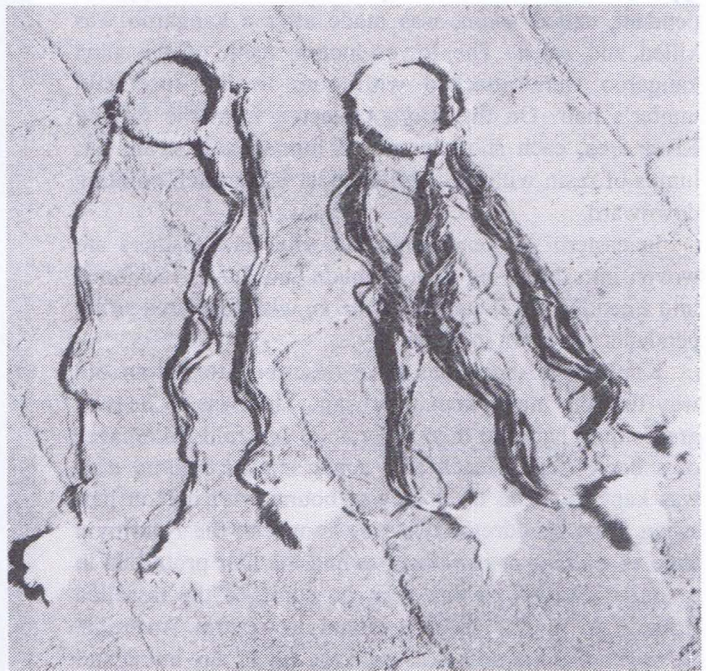


Figure 5. Tasselled armbands from Maningrida.

However, feather tasselled armbands are sometimes worn by girls at a ceremony celebrating their first menstruation (Lucy Winnunga, pers. comm.). At Maningrida in central Arnhem Land two such armbands are worn on each arm, just above the elbows, during the girl's first menstruation. At the same time, fresh, spiky pandanus leaves are wound around the fingers, wrists and below the knees to prevent her from touching herself. These items are put on the girl by her grandmother or a female cousin and she remains in her hut during this time, attended by these women. Following her five days of isolation, she goes out to where a fire with hot coals has

been prepared. Ironwood tree leaves are placed over the coals and these make a loud crackling noise and much smoke and the girl is held down over the smoke as part of a 'smoking ceremony'. During this time, there are also food taboos whereby the girl cannot eat meat, fish, or seafood.

(iii) Hair pendants (*widja/burrkuburrku*)

Tasselled figures sometimes have tassels hanging from the back of their hair or headdress (Figure 1). This feature is also seen on the Dynamic Figures from the Kakadu and Arnhem Land regions in the Northern Territory.

In the Museum of Western Australia are several Western Australian examples of short tassels which were worn from the head or neck. One that was collected from Boulder in 1913 consists of strands of human hair string with rabbit bandicoot tail pendant tips. This was used for binding up the hair and is described as being used only by initiated men. A second form of pendant consists of emu feathers hanging from a loop of human hair string collected from the Hanover Bay Mission in 1916. A third type has four fur tufts as pendants. A fourth type of pendant, called *widja*, was made after a kangaroo was killed and eaten. The lower incisor teeth of the slain kangaroo were attached with gum to the successful hunter's hair. On the *widja* collected from the Fitzroy River area, each short length of human hair string has lumps of resin with the two teeth set in parallel, pointing downward.

In eastern Arnhem Land colourful bird feathers are woven into the string as it is made and this is fashioned into a headband called *burrkuburrku* with feathered string pendants and worn in ceremony.

Kimberley Aborigines have described to me an old way that the males kept their hair. This was to heavily grease their hair and then separate it into folds like pages of a book. Within each fold some small treasured item was kept and then the hair was bound with human hair string. This headdress style was known to the Ngarinyin tribe as *mudara* or *mandarrgun* and the hair protruded in a similar fashion to that seen on some of the tasselled figures. A similar style is found in central Australia. However, this hairstyle was used for day to day living and may not have included the routine attachment of tassels.

(iv) Hanging, decorated strings

Tasselled figures can have decorated strings hanging from their neck or shoulder region down the sides of their bodies. These take several forms, one appearing to be plain string with a pendant at the end (Fig. 1), another with multiple short cross lines, perhaps representing objects such as leaves or seed pods through which the string is threaded (Welch 1993a: Fig. 3; Walsh 1994: 124 etc.) and a third with branching shapes similar to feathers being attached to the string (Welch 1993a: Figs 3, 11; Walsh 1994: 120 etc.).

The use of string hanging from the body of elaborately dressed figures continues in the period of bent knee

figures which sometimes have objects hanging from their necks and into the period of straight part figures which sometimes have zigzag lines appearing to represent a form of string hanging from their head.

(v) Hand-held string pieces

Tasselled figures in the north-eastern Kimberley hold what appear to be isolated lengths of string (Welch 1993a: Figs 5, 6; Walsh 1994: 128-129, 138-139). These lines appear unattached to any object and so it is reasonable to conclude that they are lengths of string. However, it is possible a less stable pigment such as white may have been present on the original paintings and that further detail such as feathers or other objects may have been attached. Other figures in the area carry what may be feather tasselled strings, similar to the tassels seen hanging from the waist (Welch 1993a: Figs 8 [back page], 10). In some instances, the later straight part figures also hold string pieces.

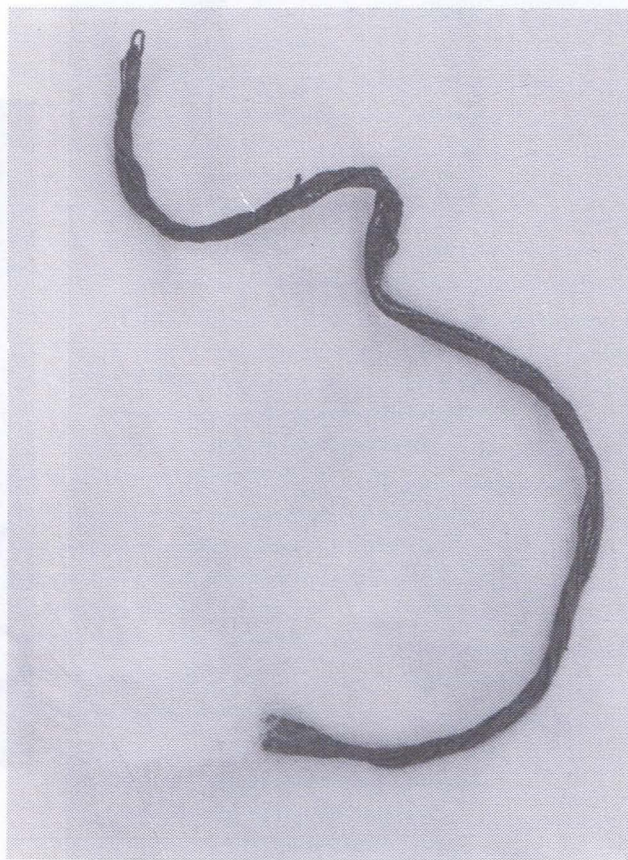


Figure 6. Ceremonial string, 72 cm, Groote Eylandt.

The northern Kimberley Aborigines I have spoken to deny any knowledge of string being held in this way during ceremonies. However, Figure 6 shows an example of a hand-held string that was used in a mortuary ceremony on Groote Eylandt off Arnhem Land. During this ceremony all of the relatives of the deceased carried such a string. It is really a cord consisting of twelve strands of string, made of dark bark from a Banyan tree (*Ficus virens*) and the whiter bark of the Peanut tree (*Sterculia*

quadrifida). The end is decorated with white down feathers attached with beeswax resin. Short lengths of string are also held during women's ceremonies of the Alyawarra tribe near Barrow Creek in central Australia (Moyle 1986: 59, 67, 68, 150). During one dance they each hold a loop of human hairstring about one metre long and as they jump forward they hold the loop taut between their hands. During another dance shorter lengths of cord made from either human or animal hair are held out towards another dancer. Thus, it appears that the holding of string pieces is a practice which has been used in ceremonies since the time of the tasselled figures.



Figure 7. Detail of possum-like figure and decorated string.

(vi) Long and decorated string (feathered string *malka*)

A second type of string is seen in the form of a long line surrounding some single and paired tasselled figures (Figure 7, Welch 1993a: Figs 3 and 4; Walsh 1994: 134-5). Of course, such a line could be interpreted in a number of ways. One might argue that it may represent a

symbolic, artistic addition to the painting.

Kimberley Aborigines did not interpret this as being string, and were unsure of the significance of the lines. On the other hand, when I have shown these images to Aborigines from Arnhem Land, they immediately interpreted the lines surrounding the figures as being decorated string. This is because long, unattached feathered strings are a feature of some Arnhem Land ceremonies (Tweedie 1985: 120-1). In eastern Arnhem Land long, feathered string, known as *malka*, is used in one of these ceremonies and held by many people, forming part of a cycle of dances connected with bees and honey. The string itself represents the flight path of the bees to and from their nest in the trees and the path of the creation hero looking for the honey (Lance Bennett pers. comm.).

Long string, thick enough to be called rope, is used in a ceremony in northern Queensland (A. I. A. S. 1962). Here, about twenty four men, each with a feathered head-dress, hold this long rope between their legs and carry a boomerang in their right hand. They dance back and forward in a long line, gradually progressing forwards whilst other members of the tribe, including women, stand about and chant. This is *punka*, the wallaby dance, and the rope is said to represent the track taken by the wallaby.

In central Australia, another ceremony uses a feather decorated cord about seven metres long stretched out, representing the path of the wild cat men as they travelled along in the mythological past (Spencer and Gillen 1927: facing page 231).

Long, straight strings and ropes such as these appear in the rock art of Kakadu in the Northern Territory (Welch 1996: Fig. 16; Chaloupka 1993: 134-5), but I have not yet identified them in the Kimberley. However, this serves to illustrate the importance and place of strings in relation to Aboriginal ceremony. Thus, the lines around these tasselled figures appear to represent a form of decorated string, possibly having been threaded through leaves or seed pods, and likely to be an item made for a ceremony.

(vii) Wands and dancing sticks

Some tasselled figures carry short 'sticks' in their hands (Figure 1A, central figure). Short sticks like these are held during ceremonies in the Kimberley and have been referred to as 'wands' (Akerman, pers. comm.). There is a range of these from across northern Australia in my collection. The smaller ones, which could be referred to as dancing wands or batons, range from 21 cm to 34 cm and have feathers attached to light sticks. The larger ones are carved and painted sticks about 90 cm long.

In the paintings, many of these have a short, wavy line hanging from the top which may represent a string attached to the stick (Figure 1A, right hand figure). It is possible that further detail such as coloured feathers were originally painted in a less stable pigment such as white or yellow. A single hanging string is found on some of the sticks and poles carried by dancers from Elcho Island off north-eastern Arnhem Land (Figures 8, 9).



Figure 8. Elcho Island dancer with feather tassel pole.

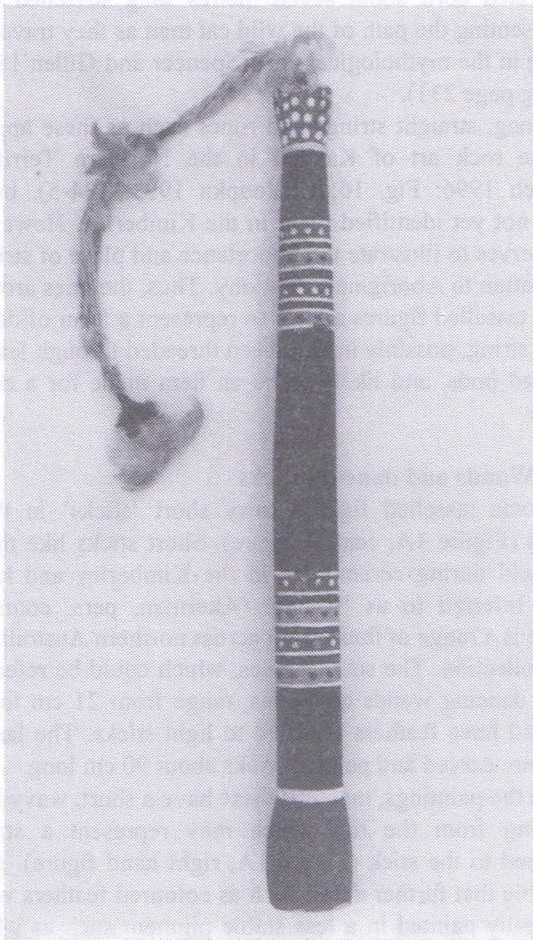


Figure 9. Ceremonial dancing stick, 52 cm, Elcho Island.

Figure 9 shows a painted ceremonial stick 52 cm long, its hanging string having orange, yellow and white feathers. This appears to be almost the exact equivalent of what we are seeing in the art. Sticks and poles with hanging strings from Arnhem Land vary in size and the larger ones are generally known as *morning star poles*, being made for the morning star mortuary ceremony in north eastern Arnhem Land. They are decorated in various ways with feathered and plain string, feathers, beeswax, and ochres.

A possible larger version of these sticks with a hanging string is seen in Welch (1993a: Fig. 7). The lower portion of the paintings are faded and one cannot determine whether the object touches ground level or is hand held. Its height reaches just above head level. Again, the equivalent can be found amongst the larger morning star poles from Arnhem Land (Hamby 1994: 37-49).

(viii) Large ceremonial poles (*nurtunja*)

There is a continuum from short wands or batons, to larger sticks, to very large poles found amongst the artefacts of the various Aboriginal tribes of Australia.

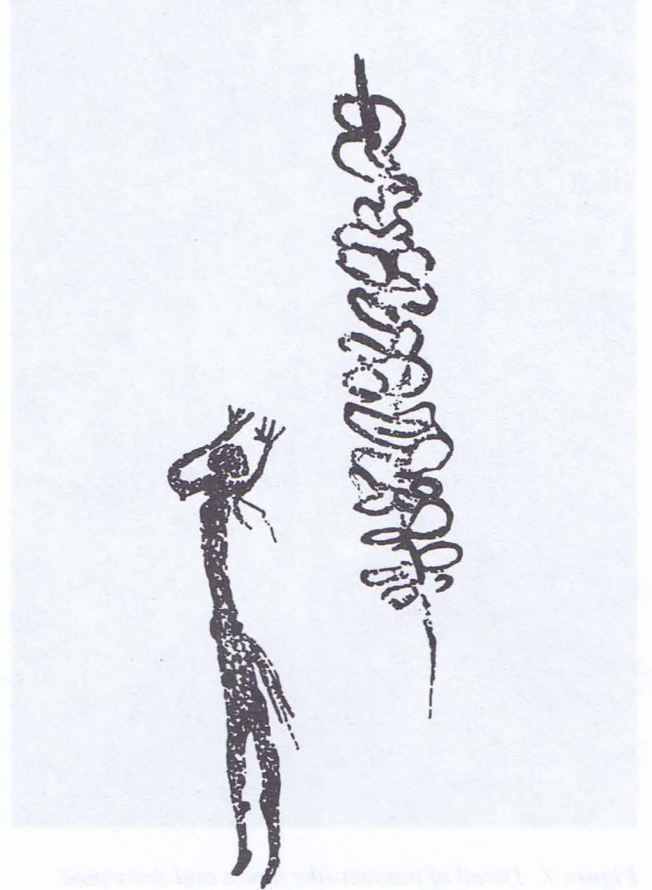


Figure 10. Kimberley Tasselled Figure, 23 cm, with decorated pole.

Figure 10 shows a faded human figure wearing a simple waist decoration and some kind of strands from the neck. Beside it, appearing in identical pigment, is an object not able to be identified by local Aborigines. This appears to have been painted as a series of loops on a

central line. A similar design is found in Koolpin Gorge in Kakadu National Park (Figure 11). There, a small figure with a projecting headdress and holding two boomerangs is associated with a long object also made with loops on each side. The action of raising both arms on the first figure and the carrying of a boomerang in each hand on the second figure are both postures that are common in traditional Aboriginal dance. This indicates that the artists are probably depicting figures associated with an object representing a ceremonial pole.

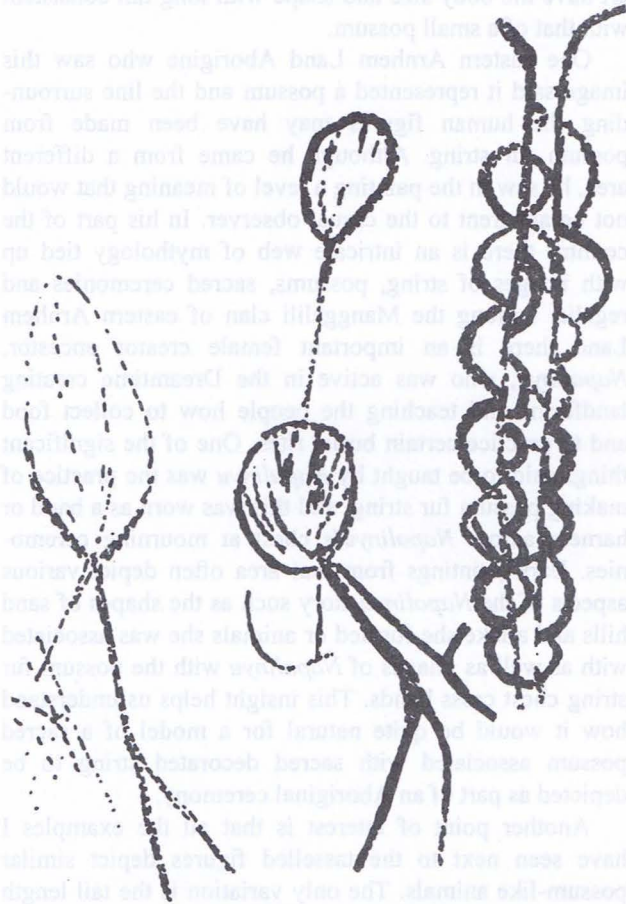


Figure 11. Kakadu simple figures with decorated pole.

On the Tiwi Islands, just north of Darwin in the Northern Territory, large carved and painted poles made from tree trunks are made specifically for the *Pukumani* mortuary ceremony. They are left in the ground after each ceremony, acting as grave markers, and are generally referred to as *Pukumani poles*, after the name of the ceremony. In some cases bark containers are placed over the top of the poles. An excellent collection of these has been placed in both the Darwin museum and Darwin airport grounds for visitors to see. Various large poles were used widely by Australian Aborigines, sometimes reserved for the most sacred ceremonies.

The objects seen in the art do not appear to be carved from wood, but rather they are made up of various materials, painted as if strings or objects are attached to a pole. Such poles are used both in central and northern Australia during certain ceremonies. On Elcho Island off Arnhem

Land the largest Morning Star Poles are free-standing, dug into the ground, and are covered with feathers and feathered string. In central Australia, among the Arunta tribe, poles were sometimes made by building up layers of grass stalks around a long spear and then binding with human hair string (Spencer and Gillen 1927: 208-9, 236-7). A bunch of eagle hawk and emu feathers were attached to the top and then human blood was used as a glue to decorate the pole with alternate rings of red and white feather down. The red down was made by mixing it with red ochre. This pole was called a *nurtunja* and featured in several of the sacred ceremonies of the Arunta.

(ix) Plants/branches held

Several tasselled figures hold branch-like objects (Welch 1993a: Fig. 10, 1996: Fig. 15). Aboriginal informants invariably interpreted these as being branches of plant material. They suggested branches may be broken from trees and held in ceremonies. One informant thought the plants being held may have particular medicinal properties. Another informant described plants his mother used to collect as having a certain aroma. Others thought certain berries are being portrayed.

The carrying of small branches of gum tree (*Eucalyptus* species) or other leaves is an integral part of ceremonies across the Kimberley and elsewhere in Australia. For example, they are carried by women during a male initiation ceremony in the Pilbara region south west of the Kimberley (Film Australia 1993). In north east Arnhem Land there is a specific *leaf dance* (Bull and Clarkson 1984). Dancers portray a *Dhuwa* spirit called *Mokui* in the beginning of time trying to find a place to live. As the *Mokui* travels he hunts, welcomes crows to finish his meal, and then sees gum trees swaying in the wind and makes up a song and dance about them. At that point in the dance, all the performers hold and wave small bushes of gum leaves.

(x) Hanging 'nets'

Crawford (1968: 81) and Walsh (1994: Pls 13, 14) illustrate examples of tasselled figures with their arms raised and a wide object hanging from the neck or shoulder area. When this object appears in the art the human figures have their arms raised as if they are part of a choreographed scene. The artefact is drawn with a mesh appearance that may simply be the artist's cross hatching, or it could also represent a large, open weave similar to that made from bush string used on contemporary Aboriginal fishing nets. Whatever it is made from, it certainly has a decorative rather than functional use.

(xi) Effigies/models representing totems (*rangga*)

It is the small animals positioned around the head or upper body of the tasselled figures (Figure 7, Welch 1993a: Fig. 3; Walsh 1994: Pls 11, 22, 23-25) which bring me to discuss the possibility that these may represent real effigies used in ceremonies. Walsh's (1994: 43) suggestion that these animals may represent a specific

rank, clan or religious marker is a good one. The Australian Aborigines have a well ordered, complex social structure and every person is assigned a totem which can be a certain animal or vegetable. Thus, it is possible that the animal figure may represent a symbolic expression of a person's totem. Another possibility is that the animals are live pets kept by the people. Possums and other small marsupials are natural pets when reared from birth.

However, the use of effigies in Aboriginal ceremonies may not be well known to the reader. Consequently, I wish to show that the small animal figures seen with some of the elaborately dressed humans could represent effigies of animals as part of a ceremony. The following early accounts mention the use of effigies, wands, feathers, poles and spears as being parts of ceremonies in other areas of Australia:

Rude images consisting of one large and two small figures, cut in bark and painted, were set up in a secluded spot; the place was strictly tabooed; the men, and afterwards the women, dressed in boughs, and having each a small wand, with a tuft of feathers tied on it, were made to dance in single file, and in a very sinuous course, towards the spot, and after going around it several times, to approach the main figure, and touch it reverentially with the wand (Parker 1854, in Smyth 1878: 166).

Eyre witnessed a remarkable dance at Moorunde in March 1844. The dancers were painted and decorated as usual, and they had tufts of feathers on their heads like cockades. Some carried in their hands such tufts tied to the ends of sticks, and others bunches of green boughs. After exercising themselves for some time, they retired, and when they re-appeared they were seen carrying a curious rude-looking figure raised up in the air. This singular object consisted of a large bundle of grass and reeds bound together, enveloped in a kangaroo skin with the flesh side outwards, and painted all over in small white circles. From the top of this projected a thin stick with a large tuft of feathers at the end to represent the head, and sticks were stuck out laterally from the sides for the arms, terminating in tufts of feathers stained red to represent the hands. From the front a small stick about six inches long was projected, ending with a thick knob formed of grass, round which a piece of old cloth was tied. This was painted white, and represented the navel. The figure was about eight feet long, and was evidently intended to symbolise a man. This figure was carried for some time in the dance. Subsequently there appeared in its place two standards made of poles and borne by two persons. The standards again were abandoned, and the men advanced with their spears (Smyth 1878: 166-7).

In the Kimberley in historic times, representations are often symbolic rather than naturalistic. For example, Kaberry (1939: 207) mentions a rain-making rite where a figure is constructed to represent the rainbow serpent and a grass cirlet is decorated with cockatoo feathers to represent another totemic ancestor. However, models such as naturalistic dolls 60 cm tall representing male and female spirits called *Namba* were 'made entirely of grass bound up by string, which is closely wound around every part of the figure so as to present a neat and compact structure. Those parts of the human body which are not easy to reproduce in relief with the above materials, such as the mouth, eyes, etc., are represented by painting done with clay of various colours. The most prominent part of these dolls is the genital organs' (Hernandez 1942: 132).

Across Arnhem Land and northern Queensland various objects made in the shape of plants and animals are

used in ceremonies to this day. They are called *ranggas* in Arnhem Land and include bound grass, carved wood, painted stone and beeswax objects. A life-like crocodile made from paperbark bound in banyan tree bark fibre string with beeswax and ochre finish is held in the Art Gallery of Western Australia (O'Ferrall 1990: 45). A yam-shaped object is illustrated in Isaacs (1984: 254).

The animal in Figure 7 was identified by Kimberley Aborigines as probably being a possum, though one person thought it may be a wallaby. Most examples in the art have the body size and shape with long tail consistent with that of a small possum.

One eastern Arnhem Land Aborigine who saw this image said it represented a possum and the line surrounding the human figures may have been made from possum fur string. Although he came from a different area, he saw in the painting a level of meaning that would not be apparent to the casual observer. In his part of the country there is an intricate web of mythology tied up with images of string, possums, sacred ceremonies and regalia. Among the Manggalili clan of eastern Arnhem Land there is an important female creator ancestor, *Napalinyu*, who was active in the Dreamtime creating landforms and teaching the people how to collect food and to practice certain burial rites. One of the significant things said to be taught by *Napalinyu* was the practice of making possum fur string, and this was worn as a band or harness across *Napalinyu's* chest at mourning ceremonies. Bark paintings from that area often depict various aspects of the *Napalinyu* story such as the shapes of sand hills and a lake she formed or animals she was associated with as well as images of *Napalinyu* with the possum fur string chest cross bands. This insight helps us understand how it would be quite natural for a model of a sacred possum associated with sacred decorated string to be depicted as part of an Aboriginal ceremony.

Another point of interest is that all the examples I have seen next to the tasselled figures depict similar possum-like animals. The only variation is the tail length and width, the example in Figure 7 appearing shorter due to deliberate rock damage. If the animal is the same in all the scenes this would indicate it took on a certain importance, and further supports the argument there may have been one ceremony centred around a specific animal story.

(B) BENT KNEE FIGURES

(i) Decorated upper arm bands

This artefact seen on bent knee figures appears tied to the upper arm with a smooth, curved surface. It was a light object, for it is shown hanging from a thin 'stalk' (probably a stick) pointing upwards, attached to the upper arm. It is likely that it was an attachment poked into a simple armband of the kind in Figure 4.

Kimberley Aborigines I spoke to were not certain of the specific item seen, one stating it was 'bushes or something', others saying it may be a feather poked into

an armband. The outline is usually rounded and could also represent a folded leaf on a stalk or similar crafted object inserted into the armband. This is similar to the situation I have just described for the tasselled figures, where everyday, simple armbands had objects inserted as additional body decoration at times of ceremony.

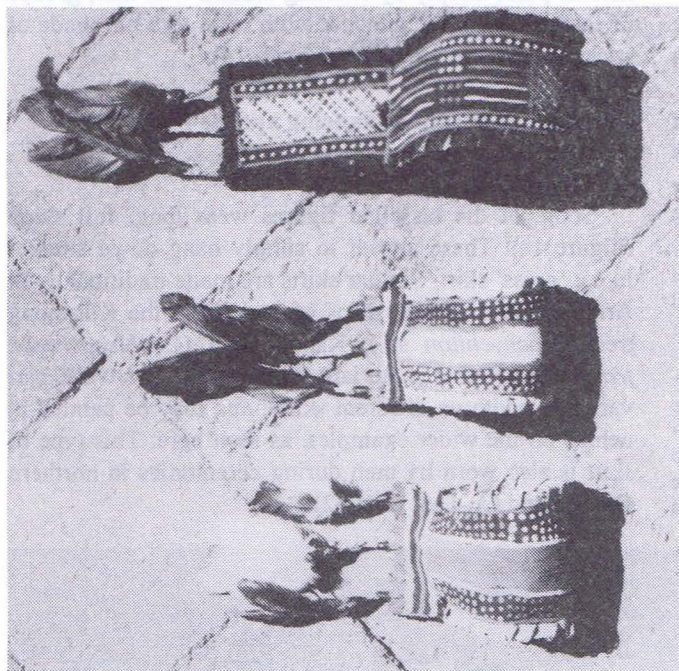


Figure 12. Women's armbands, Tiwi Islands, Northern Territory.

A different example of protruding upper arm decoration used by Australian Aborigines is seen in Figure 12. These armbands are worn by women during mourning ceremonies held on Bathurst and Melville Islands (the Tiwi Islands), just north of Darwin. They are made from either bark or palm frond, and vary in size to suit the wearer's arm. The largest ones, however, have their diameter greater than the arm and are held in place by holding the arm against the side of the body. The bark is bent when wet, tied with fibre string, painted with ochres, and decorated with feathers, beeswax resin, and sometimes red abrus seeds. The fact that the armbands are worn only during a specific ceremony gives further support to the argument that the bent knee figures represent people engaged in ceremonial activities.

(ii) Tapering/conical headdress (*ngadari*)

Tapering headdresses are a feature of the bent knee figures, and are also found on other Kimberley simple human figures with boomerangs (Welch 1996). Those on bent knee figures are usually thick-set, drawn pointing upwards as if made from a solid material, and ending in a knob representing a decoration such as folded leaves, feathers or animal fur. Kimberley Aborigines from the Ngarinyin tribe identified this headdress as *ngadari*, made from a sheet of paperbark (*Melaleuca* species) rolled into a cone. To this day this type is reserved for wearing

during ceremonies in the Kimberley, Northern Territory, and northern Queensland. In order to keep it on during ceremony, it is often made attached to the hair.



Figure 13. Conical headdress, Mornington Island, Queensland.

Figure 13 shows a free-standing form, about 40 cm tall, collected from Mornington Island off the northern Queensland coast. This example is made from small sheets of paper bark moulded into a conical shape, then held in place by tying human hair string continuously and tightly around the cone. Emu feathers are tied into the end, and the whole has been painted in red ochre and white pipeclay.

The tasselled figures also have tapering headdresses, but these are more finely tapered and hang downward as if they are an extension of the hair or made from softer materials attached to the hair. Such hair decoration is similar to the *mudara* of the Ngarinyin described earlier or to a method of the Worora where the hair is pulled over a pad of grass and feathers are tied at the end (Love 1917: 29).

Other human figures are painted with the *ngadari* headdress overlapping with the next period, that of straight part figures with missing pigment. This is easily explained by the fact that we are seeing portrayals of different ceremonies or dances. Artists appear to have used a distinct style when portraying people in the ceremony where a spearthrower and multibarbed spear were held without the *ngadari* headdress. But at the same time, other dances where the *ngadari* headdress was worn have

been portrayed in a simpler style. Perhaps these other dances lost some of their importance and were drawn in monochrome while the dance where people wore the composite headdress seen in the straight part figures warranted the use of two or three pigments.

(iii) Bird wing and feather attachments

A striking feature on some Bent Knee Figures is the attachment of complete bird wings to their heads (Welch 1993a: Figs 27-28; Walsh 1994: 188, 196-9, 206 etc.). Aborigines I have spoken to are surprised that this might have been done. However, such a body decoration was recorded in the 1890s by the pastoralist-explorer Bradshaw (1892: 99) when about sixty Aborigines watched his progress through the Kimberley

They were all armed with spears and nullis; some had what appeared to be a rude kind of bow and arrows, but none had boomerangs. Most of them were grotesquely painted with stripes of red and white, alternating with the black stripes of their natural hue. Two or three of them had imposing head-gears made, I imagine, of the pliable bark of the papyrus tree. We noticed one man in particular who had two huge appendages extending upwards and obliquely outwards from the top of his head, about 3 feet long; but whether they were made from the wing of a large bird, or were pieces of bark we could not ascertain, as he kept in the background far up the range.

Bradshaw saw no women among this group of people and I wonder whether they were painted up in order to meet him or whether they were in the middle of a ceremony. People usually spent their days hunting and foraging in small groups, and the fact that there were sixty people makes it likely they had assembled for a ceremony taking place in the area at that time.

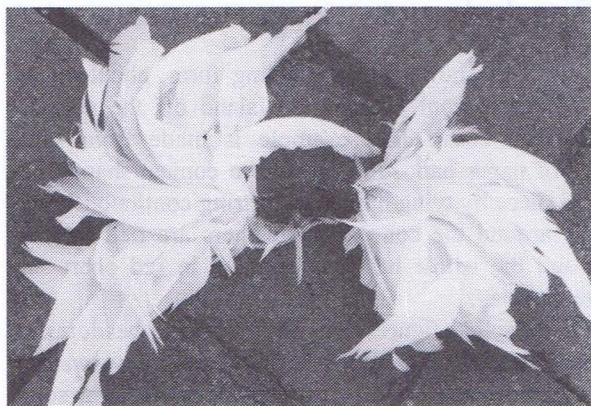


Figure 14. Feathers with wallaby bone hair pin, Tiwi Islands.

The bent knee figures have what appear to be feathers used in a number of other ways in their headdresses. Figure 1b has two single projections at the front while other examples have two at the back. Sometimes single, large feather shapes protrude vertically. A knob appears on the end of many of the conical headdresses seen in the art. This applies to the headdresses worn by both the bent knee figures and other simple figures and stick figures. While many figures have this knob in a rounded form, some examples have enough detail to make this out to be

a bunch of feathers. If we look at the conical headdresses worn by Aborigines across Australia in historical times we see that a bunch of feathers is the most common item appearing in this position.

Feathers are often worn on the head during ceremonies throughout Australia. While single feathers may be held in place simply by twisting around with hair, groups of feathers are often attached with resin to a pin made of stick, bone or stingray barb (Figure 14).

(iv) Waist decoration 'dancing aprons'/'skirts'/'bustles'

(a) Full skirts

Some of the tasselled figures wear long, full skirts (Figure 1a). These appear to simply hang down straight like a 'grass' skirt. Similar skirts are made traditionally in Arnhem Land of thin strips of bark from the Kurrajong tree (*Brachychiton* sp.), Kapok bush (*Cochlospermum fraseri*), and other materials (Figure 15). The waist part varies in width on different skirts, and may be painted in ochres on the wider examples, as seen here. This type of skirt is also worn by men during ceremonies in northern Queensland (A. I. A. S. 1962).



Figure 15. Full skirt with string ties, Arnhem Land.

(b) Part skirts/aprons.

Some bent knee figures wear sections of skirt hanging down with outward bulging (Figure 1b). This appearance is consistent with a part skirt swaying outwards as a dancer jumped or twisted about. When such part skirts appear at the front, the term 'apron' could be used. Short pubic decorations and coverings made from human hair string were commonly worn by Aborigines across Australia. These are often referred to as 'aprons', but are much shorter than the artefact seen in the art.

(c) Triangular, pointed decoration

This form of decoration appears to be tied high on the waist and sometimes as high as chest level. It hangs down at the backs of the figures and its most common form has three points facing downward (Figure 1b, Welch 1993a: Figs 21, 23, 25-27 etc.; Walsh 1994: Pls 52-54, 56-57, 60-62 etc.). This item has been named a 'three point sash' by Walsh (1994: 45) and the group of human figures wearing it are termed 'sash Bradshaws' in his chronological scheme of the Kimberley art. Walsh's 'sash Bradshaws' are the same group of figures I call 'bent knee figures'

A similar pointed object is seen on some of the *dynammic figures* in the art of Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory. However, here it is wider and hangs from the front or across the figure (Chaloupka 1984: 26, 1993: 110).

Such items may have been drawn or painted this way because of artistic licence, but more likely the specific shape indicates they were crafted from plant or animal material. This could have been from leaves, bark, feathers, woven string or animal furs. As yet, I have not seen any item in northern Australia looking similar to the object in the art, but there are other Aboriginal artefacts that could have been shaped in this way. For example, there is a reference to the trade of 'possum aprons for women and men' on the Victoria River (Harney 1995: 64), but we do not know their shape or size. Several possibilities exist from central and southern Australia and maybe there are early descriptions waiting to be rediscovered amongst archives. I would be interested to hear from readers who may have seen early photographs or records depicting such objects. One is an apron in the South Australian Museum made of a dense collection of rabbit-eared bandicoot tail tips tied together with sinew and grass string (Rowlison 1981: 145). When this hangs down it creates a basic triangular shape in the same body proportions as the object seen in the art. Another possible item is described in the following early account of a corroboree in Victoria

As the flames leap up and the light flashes through the trees, the dancers may be seen emerging from their retreat. They wear boughs around their legs, just above the ankles, and a sort of apron made of dressed skins. They form themselves into groups as they wait for the signal to commence their feats of jumping and dancing (Smyth 1878: 167).

(d) Oval-shaped pubic apron (?) pearlshell (djaguli)

Some bent knee figures have a small, bulbous shape at their front (Welch 1993a: Figs 26, 27, 29; Walsh 1994: Pls 51, 55, 61, 63). The object appears as if it were tied to the waist at one point. It varies in size and because it protrudes outwards it may have been made from some light material. One very large example of an oval shaped apron (Welch 1993a: Fig. 22; Walsh 1994: Pl. 62) would have been made from plant or animal material.

Some Aboriginal informants interpreted the smaller forms of this item as possibly being a pearlshell decoration. In historic times, pearlshell has been common on the Kimberley coast and Kimberley Aborigines have worn a

pearlshell ornament, *djaguli*, about the waist. This is attached by boring a hole through the top and tying with a human hairstring belt (Akerman and Stanton 1994). The *djaguli* hangs down flat against the genitals or thighs and if a person is standing quietly it would be difficult to depict this item in any silhouette drawing or painting. If the wearer was jumping or spinning, the *djaguli* would fly out from the body and could appear as the bulbous item does in the art. The object concerned has been painted with smooth, round edges consistent with pearlshell. However, some weathered examples have led to it being interpreted as having an irregular edge and described as a 'pom pom waistband decoration' (Walsh 1994: 196).

Pearlshell was ground, polished and traded from the Kimberley coast into the Northern Territory and South Australia. Although worn about the waist in the Kimberley, by the time it reached inland Aborigines it gained magical powers and its origin was attributed to various causes. At the Victoria River in the Northern Territory it was 'said to be the ears of dead rainbows who dwell in the lands of the big salt waters' (Harney 1995: 64). The Pitjandjara Aborigines of central Australia believed their pearlshell ornaments, often reduced in size by repeated grinding and rubbing, were a concentrated mass of water obtained at Tapidji, a far away place to the west where giant lizards (crocodiles) lived in the water and attacked the Aborigines. They believed that the medicine men of Tapidji caught the pearlshell by spearing it with a long thin spear as it swam past and then placed it in the sun to harden. The pearlshell, by this stage of its travel across Australia, was not worn and so the hole that had been drilled to accommodate the suspension cord was interpreted as a spear wound (Mountford 1976: 273-5).

There are several reasons why this oval-shaped object may not be pearlshell. As mentioned, sizes vary and the object protrudes rather than hangs down. In Historic times when pearlshell decoration is worn, the wearer does not dance or jump about greatly because the heavy pearlshell hurts the genitals when it bounces back (Akerman, pers. comm.)! The object often appears to connect with the waist as if tied from its side, not at one end as is the case with modern pearlshell pendants.

Future archaeological research into occupation deposits may determine whether pearlshell was used in the past in the northern Kimberley where this art is found.

(e) Branches from the waist (djintilli)

Occasionally, figures are seen with branch-like objects hanging from the waist (Welch 1993a: 33, Fig. 20; Walsh 1994: 208-9). These are similar to an object seen used amongst the Warramunga tribe near Tennant Creek in northern central Australia (Spencer and Gillen 1904: 198-210 etc.).

A feature which is common to all of the Kingilli ceremonies and distinguishes any one of them at once from all those of the Uluuru, is the fact that, so far as we are aware, without any exception, every performer in a Kingilli ceremony carries on either thigh what is called a *tjintilli*. Each of these consists of a central stick about a yard long, to which are attached a number of leafy, green gum-twigs. The free end of the stick is passed on either side through the waist girdle, and the *tjintilli*

is held in the middle by the hand and pressed down on the thigh when the performer dances and runs about with the usual exaggerated high-knee action.



Figure 16. Painting of woven bag, 25 cm wide, Kimberley.

(v) Bags and baskets

(a) Associated with bent knee figures ceremonial bags

In traditional Aboriginal society it is the woman who generally carries the bags. In the rock art of Kakadu, many paintings depict females carrying a dilly bag and a digging stick. However, in the Kimberley rock art almost half the bent knee figures appear to be carrying, or have hanging from their necks, a bag or two, and have no sexual characteristics to identify them as either females or males. What could be the reason for this? Aborigines from the Kimberley were unable to provide me with an answer. But if we look at ceremonial customs in the Arnhem Land region we can find one. In the case of boys' initiation ceremonies in eastern Arnhem Land, part of the preparation involves the weaving of highly colourful and decorative feathered dilly bags. Coloured parrot feathers are woven into the string as it is made, and some feathered string tassels hang from the sides (Fidock 1982: 98, 101; Tweedie 1985: 219; Warner Pl. IIIA). Several boys will go through their initiation together, each with their special bag hanging from their neck, each with feathered string tassels hanging from arm bands and waist

belts as discussed above, and each will have their bare torsos painted with a special totemic and clan pattern. These painted patterns are repeated on the bark paintings from each area. The feathers used on the bags are specific to each clan and the decorations have specific meaning. The figures have so many other features suggesting they are dancing in ceremonial costume that it seems likely the artefacts resembling bags seen on the bent knee figures are an early example of a special ceremonial bag.

(b) Other bags.

Bags appear in the art associated with tasselled figures in the north eastern Kimberley (Welch 1993a: Figs 5, 7, 8) and a painting of an isolated bag appears in the north western area in the Wandjina Period (Figure 16). The types of bags seen in these examples were not known to be made in historic times in the area. The latter painting appears fresh in the Wandjina Period. This anomaly was discussed with Akerman who suggested that possibly the bags were not made in the Kimberley, but traded from the east. Otherwise, the making of these bags has become a lost craft in this area.

(vi) Hanging objects (?) claw pendants

Many bent knee figures have an artefact appearing to hang from the neck in several strands (Welch 1993a: Figs 20-22 etc.). This has not yet been specifically identified, but represents the continuum of hanging string objects seen from the earlier tasselled figures to the later straight part figures. Variations seen in the art indicate that possibly several different objects were hung in this way. Some examples end in distinctive claw shapes (Walsh 1994 198-201) and would be consistent with claw pendants made from large birds or animals. Some may have been painted in larger scale to illustrate the detail.

(vii) Boomerangs (*kali*)

Boomerangs appear in the Kimberley rock art in a number of ways. Firstly, there are boomerang stencils giving us the exact shapes of early boomerangs. Secondly, boomerangs appear in association with human figures, and thirdly, boomerangs are held by human figures.

Amongst bent knee figures, a boomerang is often held in each hand, and sometimes two or three are depicted in the one hand. Usually it is only smaller, simpler bent knee figures shown without boomerangs. What are they doing with their boomerangs? They are never seen throwing them, nor hitting each other, and there is nothing else to suggest they are fighting or hunting. In far northern Australia in historic times the boomerang was not used for hunting or fighting, but rather kept exclusively for ceremonies where it was held and waved about, or pairs were struck together like clap sticks to mark time to music. Such boomerangs were often decorated by engraving or painting. Boomerangs used in this way were obtained through trading networks from people to the south. Even in some desert regions the boomerang was obtained through trade or made specifically for ceremonies and treasured as the most frequently used means of

song accompaniment (Moyle 1979: 33-6).

In other parts of Australia where the boomerang was used as a weapon, it was also used in ceremony. On the Macleay River in New South Wales, one account from 1845 describes elaborately painted boomerangs carried during a corroboree where the performers had painted themselves down to their toes and covered their heads with the snowy down of the white cockatoo (Smyth 1878: 172). Pen and ink drawings made in the 1860s by Aboriginal artist Tommy McCrae show Victorian Aborigines dancing with a boomerang in each hand, legs bent at the knees, and having short aprons and simple head decoration (Rowlison 1981: 111-3). These poses are further evidence that people seen depicted in this way are engaged in dance or ceremony.

Australian rock art researchers have to be careful if they describe boomerangs as part of a 'tool kit' or in terms of their role solely as a weapon. Some have considered the relationship between boomerang size and environment. These considerations become meaningless if, in fact, the boomerangs depicted were traded from elsewhere and were not used as weapons, but used exclusively during ceremonies, as has been the situation in Historic times.

(viii) Flywhisk or dance wand

Figure 17 shows two objects consisting of wooden sticks and handles with emu feathers at the end. The one on the left, 69 cm long, comes from Mornington Island and is said to be a dance wand. It is made from emu feathers bound to a stick with bush string and beeswax. The stick is painted in red ochre. Similar forms are made in Arnhem Land. The one on the right, 75 cm, is said to be a fly whisk and was made on Elcho Island off the central Arnhem Land coast. It also has emu feathers and has been painted with the design of a file snake, the artist's totem. These are similar in shape to an object held by bent knee figures (Welch 1993: Fig. 27; Walsh 1994: 268-9). The Kimberley people I have spoken to could not identify this object from the art. However, in the Kimberley to this day, when an emu is killed and eaten, the feathers are kept and made into bunches that are used to wave about in ceremonies. They are just not made with a wooden handle.

C. STRAIGHT PART FIGURES (WITH MISSING PIGMENT)

These figures sometimes wear a short, three point waist appendage similar to the bent knee figures. However, several items of material culture are almost unique to this group of human figures. They are usually depicted carrying either multi-barbed spears, spearthrowers ('hooked sticks'), or boomerangs (Figure 1c). They are often dressed with a headdress made of several parts of various shapes and painted in at least bichrome, with one of the pigments (white or yellow) having eroded from the rock surface leaving gaps. Rare examples survive with white and yellow pigments filling the gaps, indicating that

many examples were really polychrome, hence the name change from the earlier term 'bichrome figure'.

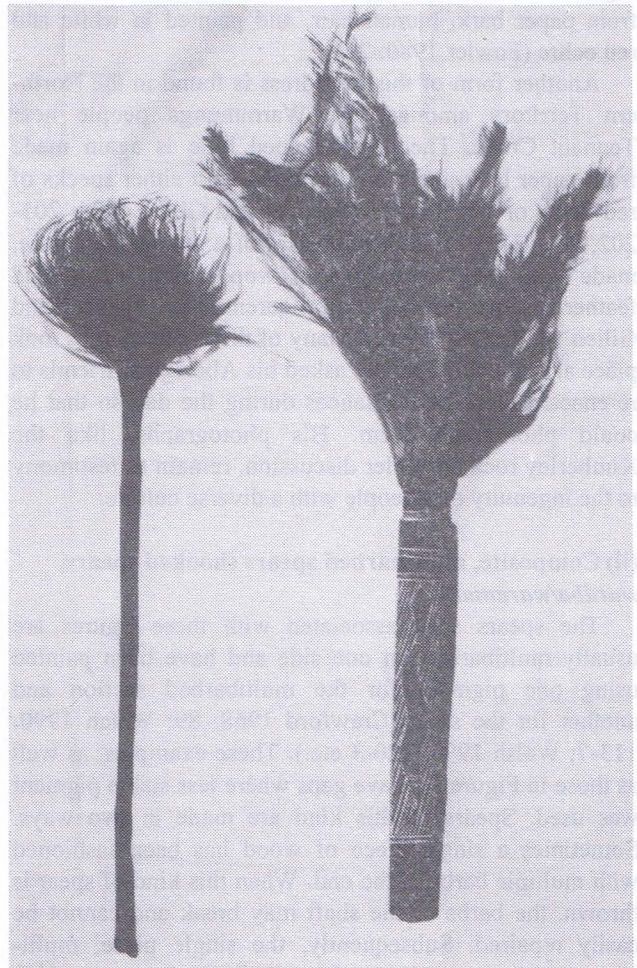


Figure 17. Fly whisks or dancing wands, northern Queensland (left) and Arnhem Land.

(i) Composite headdress with barrel/cylindrical-shaped base

A common finding amongst the straight part figures is a headdress made of several parts. The base is often barrel or cylindrical-shaped and difficult to distinguish from the head of the wearer (Fig. 1c). This is because the headdress was probably tightly worn and tied to the head. Added to the barrel-shaped base are a range of variously-shaped objects (Welch 1990: 113-8, Plate 1; Walsh 1994: 222-43).

The basic form of this headdress has survived until recent times in the Kimberley. One form, known as *ngumuru* in the far northern region, was made from paper bark 'in the shape of a bishop's hat' (M. Pandilo, pers. comm.). Another form of this using modern materials for the main section and having feather side extensions, was recorded on video for a bush turkey dance at Kalumburu in the same locality (Moyle 1991). During this dance, male dancers wearing this headdress are painted with bands across their arms and legs. Music is made with a didgeridoo and clap sticks, and women sit nearby and sing and slap their hands into their laps as an accompani-

ment.

The barrel-shaped headdress is also found on Mornington Island, off the Queensland coast. Here, it is made from paper bark, human hair, and painted in white and red ochre (Fowler 1980: 21).

Another form of this headdress is found in the Northern Territory amongst the Warramunga people near Tennant Creek. The barrel-shaped base is again made from paper bark and then decorated with either specks of red down or white ochre (Spencer and Gillen 1904: 201-202, 209, 212). Also, headdresses of a composite nature, made with long extensions of wood, bark, string and feather are made for initiation ceremonies (Spencer and Gillen 1927: 238-76 etc.). Many of these ceremonies took place at night and Spencer asked his Aboriginal friends to re-enacted these performances during the day so that he could photograph them. His photographs, like the Kimberley rock art under discussion, remain as testimony to the ingenuity of a people with a diverse culture.

(ii) Composite, multibarbed spears (hooked spears, *wardba/waraman*)

The spears seen associated with these figures are usually multibarbed on one side and have been painted using one pigment for the multibarbed section and another for the shaft (Crawford 1968: 89; Welch 1990: 113-7; Walsh 1994: 220-3 etc.). These examples, as well as those in Figure 1c, have gaps where less stable pigment was used. Spears of this kind are made in two ways. Sometimes a single piece of wood has been fashioned with multiple barbs in the end. When this kind of spear is thrown, the barbs or the shaft may break and cannot be easily repaired. Subsequently, the single piece, multibarbed spear is usually made exclusively for ceremonial, rather than functional use. The best known forms are the large ones used for ceremonies on the Tiwi Islands north of Darwin and a smaller form used in ceremonies on Groote Eylandt off eastern Arnhem Land (Figure 18). These are hand-held, and not associated with a spearthrower. In fact, the spearthrower is not used by the people of the Tiwi Islands.

The second way of making a multibarbed spear was to make the barbed section and the shaft section separately. This had the advantage that if either section broke, only one section needed replacing rather than the whole spear. Also, this kind of spear was more likely to break at the joint where a repair was easier. The barbed section was made from a hard wood and the shaft was made from a softer, lighter wood or from bamboo or thin bamboo grass which is found across northern Australia. This type of spear was usually lighter than the single piece spear and was thrown with the aid of a spearthrower. Sometimes the barbed ends without the shafts were traded across northern Australia. One isolated barbed end I have was originally collected at Wave Hill in the Northern Territory in the 1930s, and the person who collected it was told that the barbed hooks were used as a 'fish drying stick'. Figure 18 shows the wide range of spacing used between the barbs. The left hand example is a painted, single piece

spear used in ceremony on Groote Eylandt. The other examples are composite spears with the barbed end joined to the shaft with resin and string (not seen in photograph).

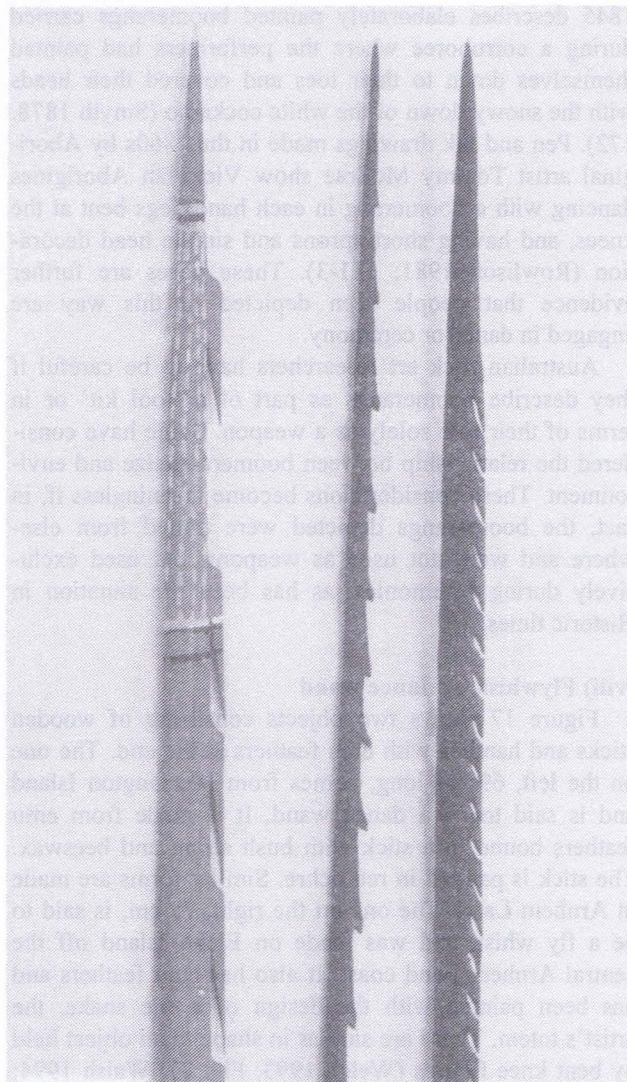


Figure 18. Detail of multibarbed spears.

The fact that a different pigment was used to paint the spear shafts and barbed ends in the paintings may indicate either the real difference between the two sections on the second type of spear or it could represent painted decoration on a single-piece spear used in ceremony. In historic times the hooked spear, known as *wardba* to the *Ngarinyin* people, was not made locally, but rather traded from Arnhem Land and Port Keats into the Kimberley. The hooked end was made from harder wood and attached to a very light shaft called *milinyin* (Billy King, pers. comm.). In another part of the Kimberley in the 1930s it was noted that 'the hooked spears, *waraman*, from the Northern Territory, are not used by the Kimberley tribe in a fight, but are valued as objects of exchange for the intricacy of their workmanship' (Kaberry 1939 163). Again, it is important to realise an object which we may regard solely as a weapon, can in fact, be traded and treasured as a prized object, or may not be even used as a weapon.

This provides supporting evidence that the straight part figures may be holding their spears as part of a ceremony or dance rather than being prepared for a fight or hunt.

(iii) Cylindrical/stick-like spearthrower

Straight part figures often carry a thin spearthrower with or without their spears. This appears to differ from the broader, 'lath'-type spearthrower used by northern Kimberley Aborigines in historic times. It may be that the spearthrower has been drawn as a thin, straight line in keeping with this style where human figures are painted in straight lines. However, such a spearthrower is made in the southern Kimberley and Figure 19b shows a specimen, known as *bigirri*, made by Jungurra of the Jaru tribe in the Halls Creek area. In this area, it is one of three different types of spearthrower made.

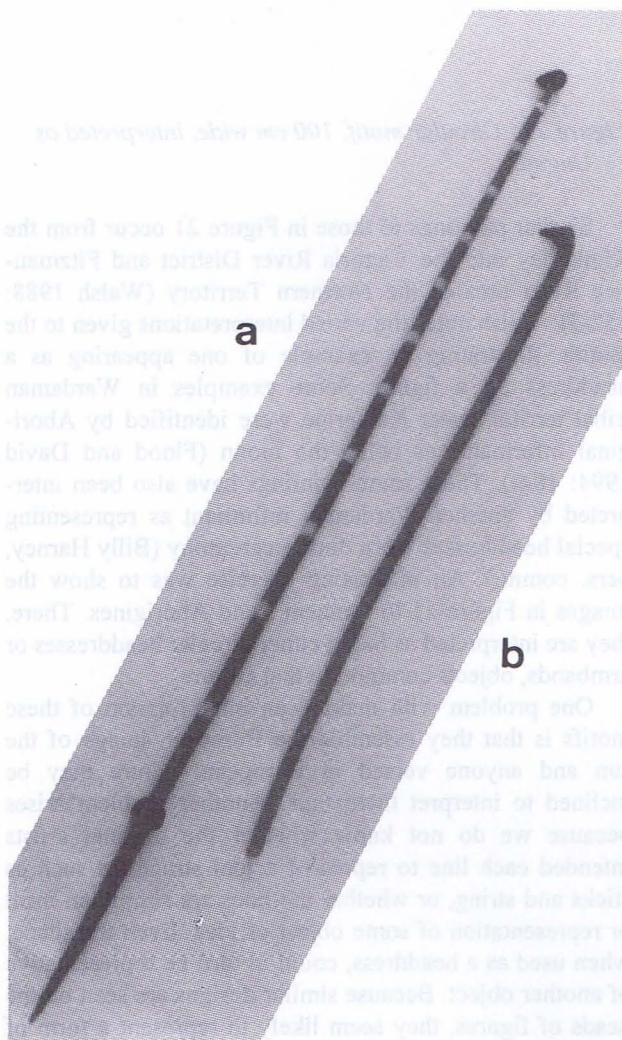


Figure 19. Cylindrical spearthrowers (a) 113 cm, Port Keats, Northern Territory, (b) 77 cm, Kimberley.

In the Northern Territory thin spearthrowers are best known from the Port Keats, Daly River area (Figure 19a) where they are used to throw short, light spears made from bamboo grass shafts and hardwood mangrove tree points. The example in Figure 19a has the hook made from a very hard resin obtained by heating and pounding

the root of the Ironwood tree (*Erythrophleum chlorostachys*). This black, hard resin is also used to coat the handle and mould the handle grip. Such a thin, light spearthrower is best used on lightweight spears. Similar thin, stick-like spearthrowers were also found across Arnhem Land and north-western Queensland, sometimes having a hair string tassel attached to the handle, and in parts of Arnhem Land, were used only in ceremony (Warner 1958: 484-5, Pl. 2a following p. 558).

(iv) Hanging strings

Some straight part figures have zigzag lines falling from the head region which appear to be a form of string decoration (Crawford 1977: 359; Walsh 199: 216-7). We have seen that feather decorated string pendants are popular in eastern Arnhem Land and plain string has been recorded held in ceremonies. In the Kimberley, string smeared with fat and red ochre was coiled around the neck and worn by women mourning the death of a relative (Kaberry 1939: 215). One Ngarinyin informant told me this was called *munguna* and I know of similar string being worn for a year by a widow on the death of her husband in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. These are short strings held close to the body, and I have previously mentioned the possum fur string harness worn at mourning ceremonies in eastern Arnhem Land. These examples serve to illustrate that string can have specific ritual importance in Aboriginal culture.

The longer string seen on figures in the art is likely to become a nuisance during times of hunting and fighting and is most likely another artefact worn as decoration during a ritual, ceremony or dance.

D. OTHER ITEMS SEEN IN THE ART

Shields

Figure 20 shows a painting of an isolated, broad shield at Mochelabra dam south of Wyndham on the north-eastern Kimberley coast. In historic times people of the Ngarinyin tribe of the central, northern Kimberley did not make shields, while coastal tribes such as the Worora and Wunambal tribes on the north-western coast did. The Reverend Love (1917: 23) described the use of the shield amongst the Worora when two people would face each other armed only with their club and large shield. This took the form of ritualised hand-to-hand fighting used to settle arguments. During this activity, spears were not used by the combatants. In those areas of Australia where shields were not used, the people used either a stick or their spearthrower to deflect spears in a fight.



Figure 20. 'Shield', 92 cm.

Shields do not feature in the early art, but I would be reluctant to say that this necessarily excludes their presence from the material culture of the early Kimberley Aborigines. This is because I feel many human figures are depicted in ceremony and we are only seeing the items carried during those specific ceremonies. In the more recent art, simple figures are depicted holding stick-like objects above their heads (Welch 1995: 26). Some of these are frontally aligned figures with knees bent as if dancing, and having an object that probably represents a waist decoration hanging down. The object held could be a club, throwing or dancing stick, or shield.

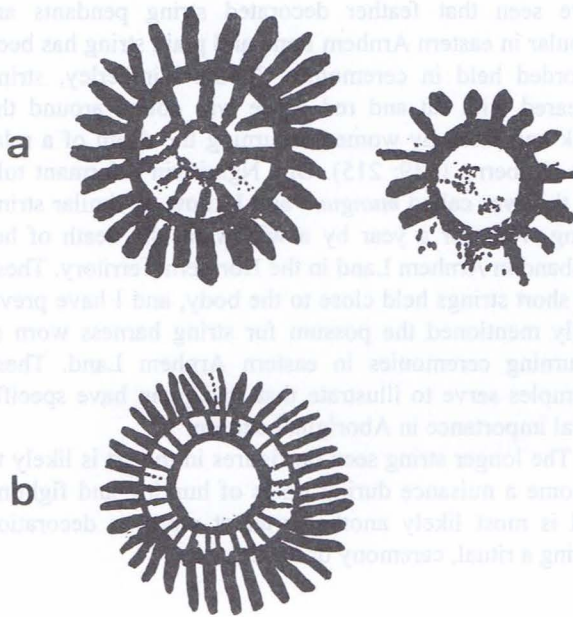


Figure 21. Circular motifs, Kimberley.

Isolated circular headdresses

Figure 21 shows three examples of circles with rays occurring in the northern Kimberley. One pair are painted white, while the other is in brown pigment. The Kimberley Aborigines I have spoken to interpret these images in a number of ways. The most frequent interpretation is that they represent 'Wandjina', the dominant mythological being for the region. On further questioning, this is explained as being representative of a Wandjina's head or headgear. One person said they thought it might be the sun, another the moon or a bright star, and others could not identify it. Figure 22, located near 21b on the northern coast at Kalumburu, survives in red ochre in the shallow recess of a rock at ground level. Mary Pandilo told me the painting was Ungud, a form of mythological serpent. The reader will note the painting consists of concentric circles similar to the previous examples, and is not a typical serpent painting. On further questioning, Mary explained that her understanding of the painting was that her parents had always regarded it as Ungud, painted by *Kira Kiro*.

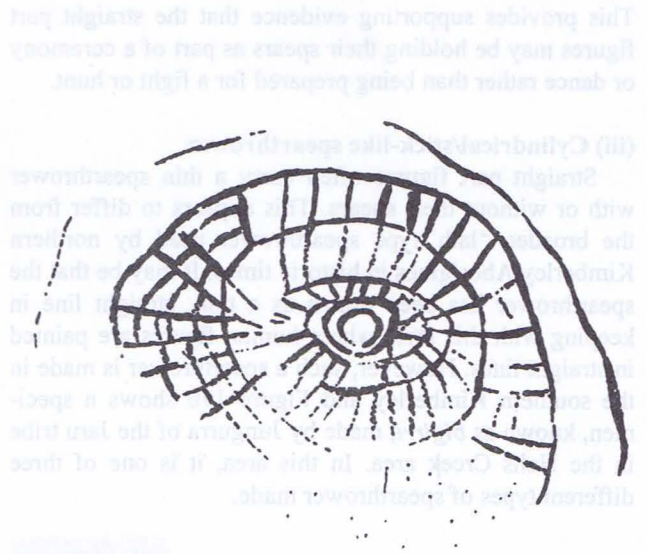


Figure 22. Circular motif, 100 cm wide, interpreted as Ungud.

Similar paintings to those in Figure 21 occur from the Kimberley into the Victoria River District and Fitzmaurice River area of the Northern Territory (Walsh 1988: 152-3). Walsh notes the varied interpretations given to the motifs, illustrating an example of one appearing as a headdress on a figure. Some examples in Wardaman tribal territory near Katherine were identified by Aboriginal informants as being the moon (Flood and David 1994: 18-9). These same paintings have also been interpreted by another Wardaman informant as representing special headdresses worn during ceremony (Billy Harney, pers. comm.). An interesting exercise was to show the images in Figure 21 to Arnhem Land Aborigines. There, they are interpreted as being either circular headdresses or armbands, objects common to that culture.

One problem with making an interpretation of these motifs is that they resemble the European image of the sun and anyone versed in European culture may be inclined to interpret them thus. Another problem arises because we do not know whether the original artists intended each line to represent actual structures such as sticks and string, or whether the lines are simply an infill or representation of some object or idea. Even the shape, when used as a headdress, could in turn be representative of another object. Because similar designs are seen on the heads of figures, they seem likely to represent a form of headdress or similar ceremonial object. Such headdresses and hand-held objects were made by Aborigines across Australia from a framework of sticks wound around with various strings. They were used in ceremony and I have previously illustrated what I believe are examples in the rock art of the Kimberley and Kakadu (Welch 1996: Figs 20, 21). In central Australia these objects are known as *wananga* and amongst the Ngarinyin tribe of the Kimberley one name for the headdress form is *marangi*.



Figure 23. 'Playing the didgeridoo' 21 cm.

Didgeridoo

In Figure 23, the small figure at left and the legs and lower portion of the main figure are in red pigment, while the upper part is painted over by charcoal. It is not clear whether a third human figure once existed. Despite weathering, this panel clearly shows the main figure holding something to its mouth, consistent with the action of playing the didgeridoo. Another Kimberley painting of a figure playing the didgeridoo also survives in a blackish, charcoal pigment. I have not seen a didgeridoo appearing in the older art where paintings survive as red stains on the rock.

Unidentified objects

Sometimes items appearing in the art cannot be identified, but may represent items of material culture. Figure 24 is an elongated object drawn with breaks in the perimeter, as if this is made up of two separate parts with the joints shown. The central elongated shape is drawn with loops as if string knots or a string game is being illustrated. From the outer perimeter protrudes a branch-like object. One cannot be certain whether this branch-like object was intended to hang down or point upwards because the painting is on a ceiling and its orientation is ambiguous. Kimberley Aborigines who have seen this image have not been able to positively identify it. Some have said it looks like a coolamon or a baby within a coolamon.

Figure 25 is painted horizontally and appears to have artificial, branch-like projections. Some of these projections are similar in shape to those seen on headdresses and carried by human figures in the art. Local Aborigines were unable to identify this object, and I wonder whether it represents a crafted object made from material such as feathers or branches.

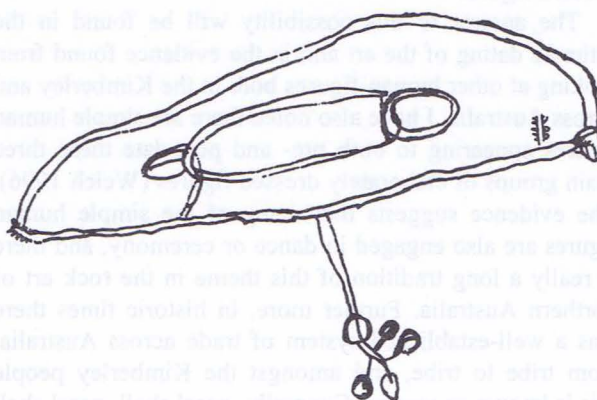


Figure 24. Unidentified object, 82 cm long.

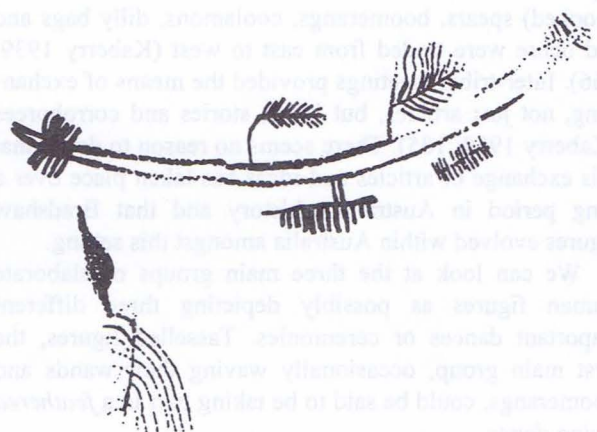


Figure 25. Unidentified object, 52 cm long.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper has been to discuss in detail some of the artefacts associated with early human figures in the Kimberley. In doing so, we have seen at least 20 artefacts which have been used in historic times exclusively during Aboriginal dances and ceremonies. Other artefacts have both a functional and ceremonial use. The evidence is overwhelming that the three main groups of early human figures described are all dressed for ceremony or dance. Furthermore, the items of dress are not alien to Aboriginal Australians. Each has a counterpart seen in the context of a ceremony, secret, sacred or open, held somewhere in Australia in historic times. Hypotheses regarding the interpretation of Australian rock art cannot be made when the art is taken out of cultural context. In order to make interpretations about the art one needs as much information as possible from both current and historic sources.

Some people may still argue that possibly an alien people brought this culture into Australia through the north west, that it was recorded in the Kimberley region, and supposedly it then spread across Australia, leaving bits and pieces here and there. If this were plausible, it would have necessitated three waves of colonisation to

correspond with the three main periods of elaborately dressed figures.

The answer to this possibility will be found in the ultimate dating of the art and in the evidence found from looking at other human figures both in the Kimberley and across Australia. I have also noted there are simple human figures appearing to both pre- and post-date these three main groups of elaborately dressed figures (Welch 1996). The evidence suggests that many of the simple human figures are also engaged in dance or ceremony, and there is really a long tradition of this theme in the rock art of northern Australia. Further more, in historic times there was a well-established system of trade across Australia, from tribe to tribe, and amongst the Kimberley people this is known as *wunan*. Generally, pearl shell, pearl shell ornaments, bamboo necklaces and certain types of boomerangs passed from west to east across the Kimberley. Certain spears with bamboo shafts, multibarbed (hooked) spears, boomerangs, coolamons, dilly bags and red ochre were traded from east to west (Kaberry 1939: 166). Inter-tribal meetings provided the means of exchanging, not just articles, but ideas, stories and corroborees (Kaberry 1939: 185). There seems no reason to doubt that this exchange of articles and ideas has taken place over a long period in Australia's history and that Bradshaw figures evolved within Australia amongst this setting.

We can look at the three main groups of elaborate human figures as possibly depicting three different important dances or ceremonies. Tasselled figures, the first main group, occasionally waving their wands and boomerangs, could be said to be taking part in a *feathered string dance*.

Bent knee figures, frequently holding boomerangs in each hand, could be said to be taking part in a *boomerang dance*. Their position with both knees bent may have represented a standing, bent knee position or a jumping action. They could have been imitating a hopping animal such as a kangaroo, wallaby or bird. On one panel of these figures a bird is seen amongst them. In several examples the presence of large kangaroos or just kangaroo tracks associated with some of these figures indicates it may be a *kangaroo dance*.

With the third main group a composite headdress appears with a cylindrical base and sometimes extensions shaped like branches and individual heart-shaped leaves. These shapes were probably symbolic of a totem or story since lost. Straight part figures often hold a thin, cylindrical spearthrower, with or without associated spears. Perhaps we could call this the *spearthrower dance*.

The range of evidence presented in this paper strongly suggests that Bradshaw artists were ancestors of modern day Aboriginal people. The articles of adornment were not the everyday dress of a foreign people, but rather elaborate ceremonial dress which probably took several weeks to make and was worn during ceremonies held only once or twice each year.

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Résumé. Cet article décrit des objets de culture matérielle représentés dans les peintures Bradshaw de la région de Kimberley, au nord-ouest de l'Australie. Les articles représentés peuvent être étroitement égalés aux exemples récents d'attrails cérémoniels aborigènes du Kimberley et d'ailleurs en Australie, en particulier de la Terre d'Arnhem. En fait, le degré de correspondance indique que les peintures Bradshaw représentent des personnes au cours d'une danse et d'une cérémonie. L'article conclut que l'attrail cérémoniel des artistes anciens du Kimberley montre une continuité solide avec celui des peuples aborigènes récents et qu'il n'est pas nécessaire d'évoquer des étrangers pour expliquer l'élégance des peintures Bradshaw.

Zusammenfassung. Dieser Beitrag beschreibt Kulturgegenstände, die in den Bradshaw Malereien des Kimberley Gebietes von Nordwestaustralien dargestellt sind. Diese Gegenstände sind gut vergleichbar mit rezenten Beispielen von Aboriginal Geräten in den Kimberley und anderswo in Australien, besonders in Arnhem Land. Die Übereinstimmung deutet sogar an, daß die Bradshaw Malereien Leute in Tanz und Zeremonie darstellen. Der Artikel zeigt das Weiterleben des zeremoniellen Inventars der frühen Kimberley Künstler in dem rezenter Aboriginal Gruppen, und daß keine Notwendigkeit vorliegt, Außen-seiter anzuführen, um die Eleganz der Bradshaw Malereien zu erklären.

Resumen. Este artículo describe ítems de la cultura material representada en pinturas Bradshaw de la región Kimberley, en el nor-oeste de Australia. Los ítems representados pueden ser estrechamente emparejados con ejemplos recientes o adornos ceremoniales Aborígenes en Kimberley y en otras partes de Australia, particularmente en Arnhem Land. En efecto, el grado de relación recíproca indica que las pinturas Bradshaw representan gente en actitud de baile y ceremonia. El artículo concluye que el inventario ceremonial de los antiguos artistas de Kimberley presenta una fuerte continuidad con aquél de las naciones Aborígenes recientes y que no hay necesidad de llamar a extraños para explicar la elegancia de las pinturas Bradshaw.

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