



**THE
ARTEFACT**

REPRINT

Published by the

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY
OF VICTORIA INCORPORATED

**CORRECTIONS TO
SIMPLE HUMAN FIGURES PAPER
BY DAVID M. WELCH**

This paper was revised and altered following its initial submission for publication. Unfortunately, the journal editor made the necessary changes to the text and the order of the Figure captions, but did not follow my request to adjust the drawings from their initial order. In those days, original numbered drawings had to accompany the initial submission. An addendum appeared in the following volume of the journal. Subsequently, I have altered the Figure numbers on this copy of the article.

David M. Welch

KEYWORDS: *Dance - Ceremony - Human figure - Kimberley - Australia*

Simple human figures in Kimberley rock art, Western Australia

DAVID WELCH

Abstract. Kimberley human figures are depicted in a variety of types and styles with various head-dresses, carrying boomerangs in each hand and in alignments that suggest to the author that they are dancing or engaged in ceremony. An early gymnastics scene where a person is said to perform a somersault or cartwheel is described. Similar figures to those described previously for the Kakadu region have now been identified in the Kimberley and are discussed and compared here.

Introduction

In my previous work on the Kimberley district I discussed some of the early human figures that fall into three main groups. These were the 'tasselled figures', 'bent knee figures', and 'figures with straight parts and missing pigment' ('bichrome figures' or 'straight part figures'). Figures from each group are found over a wide area of the northern Kimberley region and were chosen as the starting point for discussion because of their frequent occurrence, their outstanding artistic qualities, excellent draughtsmanship, and the fact that each group appears to belong to a chronologically distinct period (Welch 1990, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c).

The consistency within each of the three distinct types suggests that each group was carried out by a school of artists who practised and perfected their art style on some other medium before applying pigment to the rockshelter walls. An identical situation has existed until Historic times in the area, with the production of Wandjina art. Youths were made to practice painting on rocks beside water and the tribal elders chose the best artists for further formal training. The practice paintings were washed away, and the youths who were not chosen were told not to paint and were threatened with death if they interfered with paintings in the main rockshelters (Billy King 1992).

The purpose of this paper is to further discuss the wide range of other human figures that appear in the Kimberley rock art. This includes stick-like human figures, simple figures in various poses, groups that appear to be dancing, other groups consistent with the depiction of ceremonial activities, unique depictions of females, and the existence of 'running' figures similar to the 'dynamic figures' of Arnhem Land. Where possible I will give the approximate position of the figures in terms of my previously discussed relative chronological sequence (Welch 1993a: 25).

There are two large groups of human figures in the area that are not discussed in this paper. The first is a group seen in story panels associated with the painted hand with long fingernails motif in a 'segmented' style (Welch 1993b: 104-6). The second group are the many anthropomorphic figures associated with the more

recent Wandjina art period. These include the *Agula* (devils), *Djimi* (spirits) and *Wurrulu* (bush sprites) (Crawford 1968: 91, 94).

In the following discussion, each section will deal with a different aspect of the art.

Relative age of the paintings

My research reveals that stick figures and other simple figures appear amongst the earliest to the most recent art and do not belong to just one chronological period. Superimpositions can be found which help us to obtain relative dates for the art. For example, in Figure 1 the arm



Figure 1. 'Stick' figure, 85 cm, painted over by lower figure with boomerangs. Measurements given on the illustrations indicate the height of the figure or panel, unless indicated otherwise.

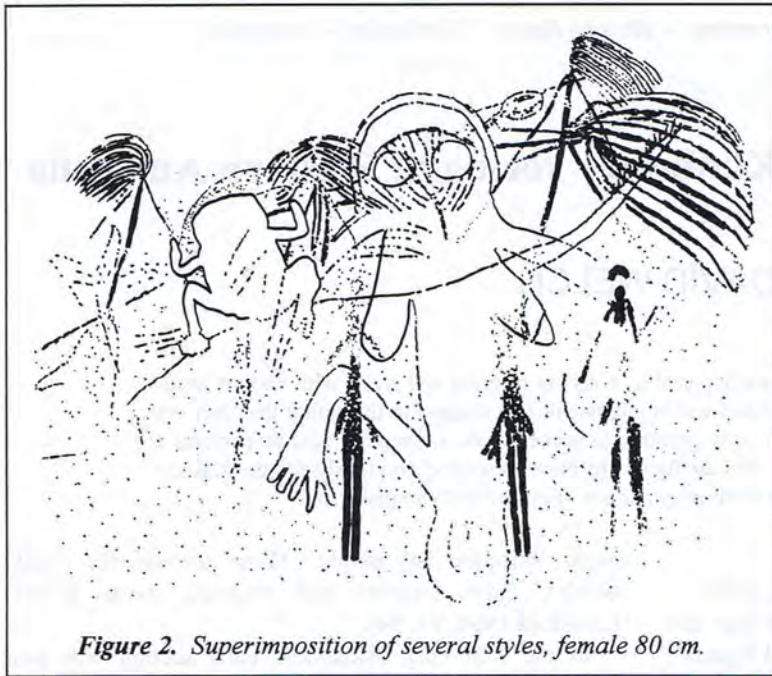


Figure 2. Superimposition of several styles, female 80 cm.

of the lower figure crosses the leg of the taller stick figure. This lower figure belongs to the group of figures with straight parts and missing pigment. The earlier tall stick figure has curved lines extending from the upper arms which may have represented some form of body decoration.

In Figure 2, the same type of stick figure appears

below layers of pigment. In this example, the hair or headdress is shown in profile on the outer figures and frontally on the central figures. Weathered straight part figures and the back and tail of an animal can be made out, all surviving as bonded red pigment. The most recent paintings are the female and smaller figure seen squatting, surviving in white.

Figure 3 (Plate 1) shows five different art styles on the one panel. The oldest paintings appear as the lower section of four human figures seen on lower left. One of these figures has splayed legs. Superimposed is the figure with missing pigment and composite headdress drawn here in outline. Over this lies the tall figure, paired with the right-hand figure of similar proportion. I use stippling in many of my drawings of the old art in order to represent as accurately as possible the degree of weathering that is present. However, on the left-hand tall figure the short dashes

represent each individual dash of pigment that survives of this painting. Up to this point, these paintings are bonded to the rock and survive in various red pigments. To the right of centre, the cross-legged figure is blackish and appears older than the tall one. The most recent paintings are the two figures with legs spread widely apart (the lower one frog-like) painted in yellow.

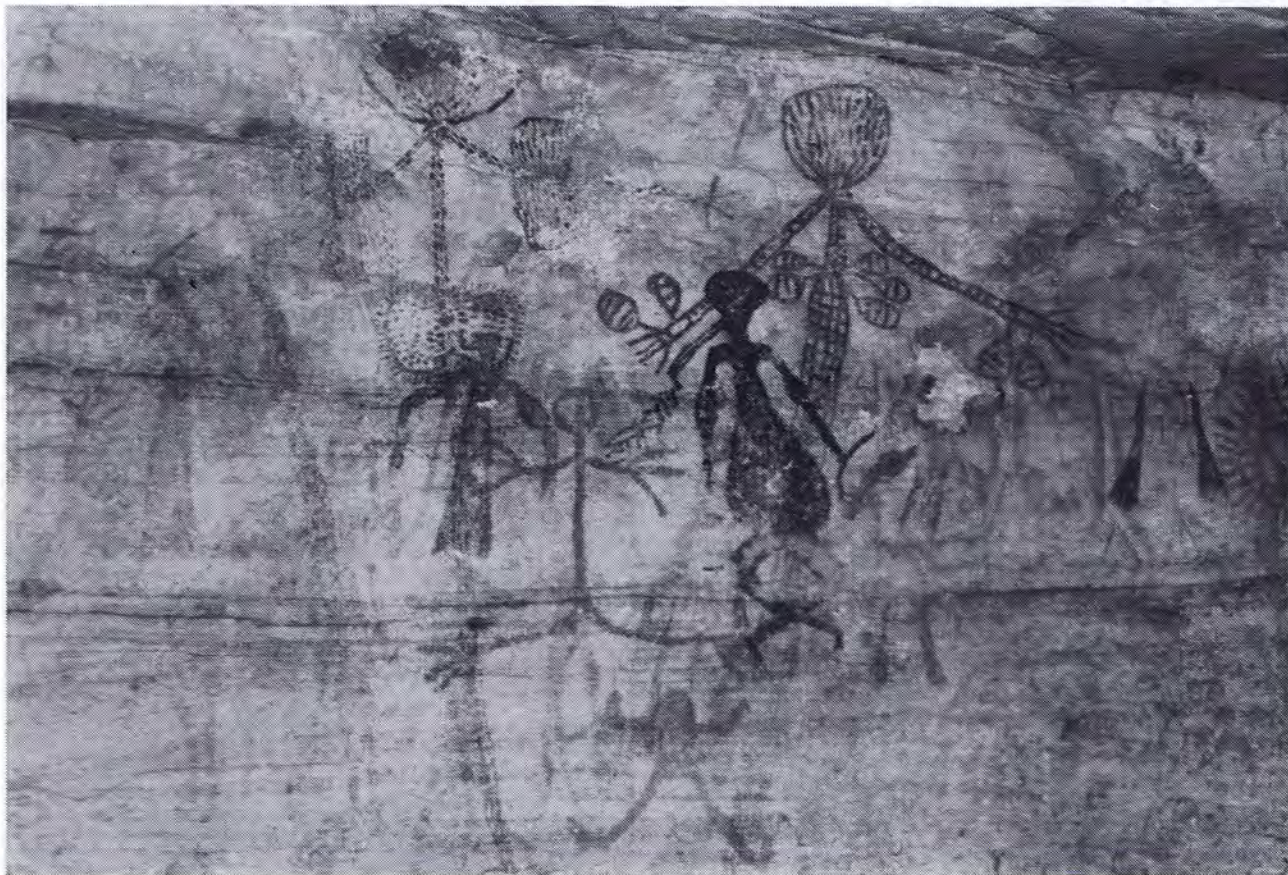


Plate 1. Superimposition of five different 'styles'.

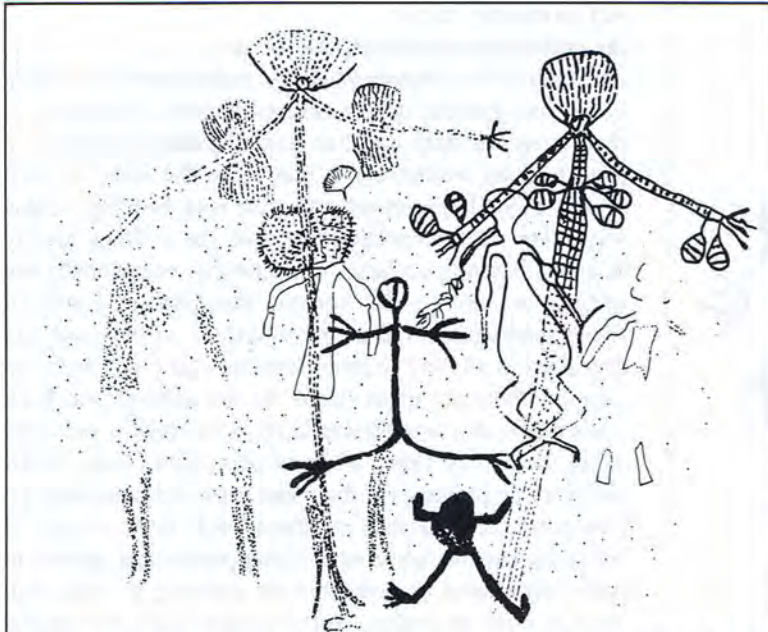


Figure 3. Thin simple figures with waist and arm decoration, left figure 60 cm.

Figure 4 shows simple human figures with the type of splayed feet seen on two of the oldest figures in the lower portion of Figure 3. In what appears to be the one scene, some figures stand while two others with tall headdresses squat and a bird is painted in irregular dash infill. The use of irregular dashes and blobs of paint as infill is found on early paintings of plants and animals in both the Kimberley and Kakadu regions. The other shapes are of similar great age, but the bird appears over part of them. The pigment survives in the mulberry hue and the panel appears about the age of the tasselled figures or bent knee figures. Many Aboriginal myths and legends are concerned with the creation of various animals and plants and these stories are acted out in dramatic form during ceremonies and dances across Australia. For this reason, it is possible that when human figures appear wearing items of decoration known to be associated with ceremonies, and there are apparently associated animals in the art, the artist has portrayed the elements of a legend or the

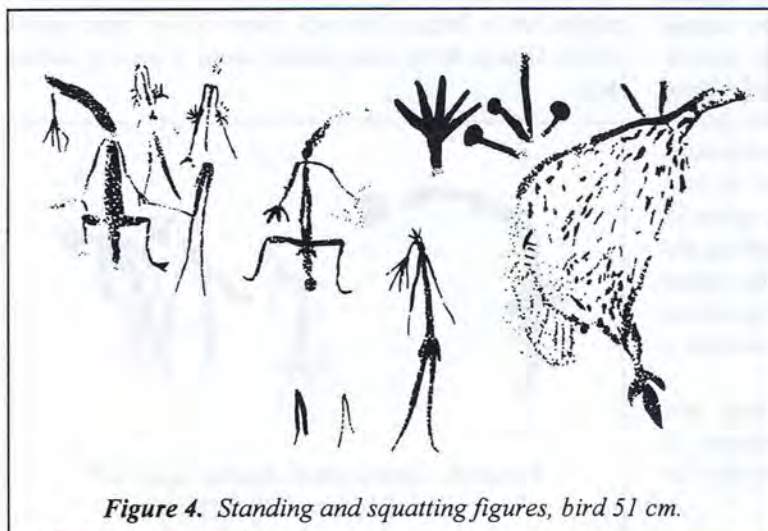


Figure 4. Standing and squatting figures, bird 51 cm.

depiction of people acting out that legend.

Figure 5 is a panel that has silica skin covering it and there has been rock spalling, but there is no overpainting. If overpainting had occurred, it may have been made in a less stable white or yellow pigment and subsequently weathered away. Based on my observation of its weathering, I feel that this example can be placed amongst the earliest examples of Kimberley rock art.

Kimberley Aborigines have interpreted this arrangement as a fighting or dancing scene. When one informant interpreted the scene as a possible fight he identified the shorter (weathered), central headdress as being the person's hair tied up. The description given was that of the hair being separated into layers like pages in a book and then being greased with kangaroo fat. Layers were made of this greased hair, then red ochre, clay, mud and then a layer of hair again. A valuable item might be stored in this hair bundle and the hair was tied up at the back of

the head with kangaroo fur string. This type of hair decoration was known to the Ngarinyin tribe as *mudara* and was worn for day to day activities. Other informants I spoke to identified the headdresses seen here as being the tall, conical headdress made from a roll of paperbark (*Melaleuca* species) called *ngadari* by the Ngarinyin tribe. This headdress was made and worn only for traditional ceremonies and dances. One elderly lady said: 'This is *ngadari* alright. Dancing one. This is throwing stick. They are dancing with a boomerang, with a *kali*'. Boomerangs are often held during dance and ceremony, as well as being used as clap sticks. The fact that a group of human figures are frontally aligned, some having long headdresses and laterally protruding head decoration while others are depicted with possibly their arms tucked up, suggests that a ceremony is being portrayed.

There are two points to note stylistically about Figure 5. The first is the way the small figures have been depicted. If these were intended to be women, they may have been painted with lines designed to represent both the breasts and the arms. When figures with definite breasts are painted in both Kimberley and Kakadu rock art, they usually have no elaborate headdress while accompanying figures without breasts (presumed to be males) do. Women may play a secondary role taking part in the dancing and singing, a fact reflected in the rock art. Women do, however, also have their own special dances, and some of these are seen in rock paintings from Arnhem Land (Mountford 1956: 117, 148).

Another possibility is that the arms of the smaller figures were in another pigment since weathered away. There is also the possibility that they are not actually women doing the

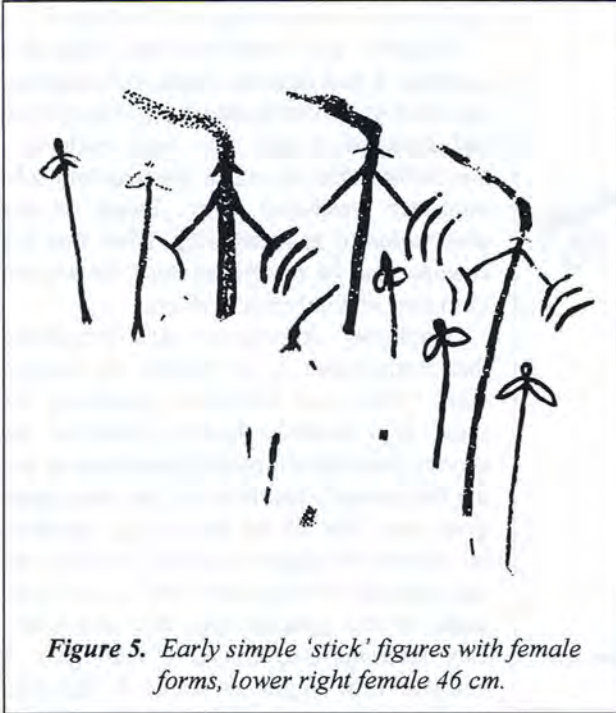


Figure 5. Early simple 'stick' figures with female forms, lower right female 46 cm.

dancing. It could be that male neophytes are engaged in a dance and tuck their arms up in order to represent females who are characters in a drama. Many ceremonies were traditionally men-only ceremonies, or had parts that were restricted to males. If there was a female part in such a restricted dance, then a male dressed as a female. An example of this was recorded in Arnhem Land, where a man was painted with a string harness worn by present-day women in order for him to represent two old creator sisters in a dance (Warner 1958: 273).

The second stylistic point of interest in Figure 5 is the way that the three boomerangs are depicted in parallel. This is a common feature on early Kimberley figures (Welch 1993a: Figs 9, 16 etc.). Petroglyphs across Australia that include animal tracks and circles amongst their motifs sometimes have the motif of two or three parallel curved lines. These 'arcs' or 'crescents' are identical to the way these boomerangs are depicted and this may represent a continuation in style between the petroglyphs and the painted art. While it is common to hold one boomerang in each hand in ceremonies across Australia held this century, the clutching of several boomerangs in the one hand is generally not found. I have asked people whether it is possible for one to have generated a clapping sound by rattling a clutch of boomerangs together in one hand and yet, no-one has heard of this. However, there was a practice of holding several spears in the horizontal position in one hand and then jerking the hand up and down quickly in order to make the spears rattle against each other. With at least, say, five spears together one can make quite a noise that can be used for a corroboree or to be a warning before a fight.

In terms of the relative age of these paintings, this example helps to show us that there is a continuity of figures depicted in ceremony back to the earliest art forms.

Art on ceiling 'steps': the rockshelter itself shaping the art

Much of the (presumed) oldest painted art in Australia is on fine-grained quartz-sandstone rock. Because this rock is sedimentary and has been deposited in layers, a feature of its weathering is that large flat slabs of rock also exfoliate in layers reflecting the rock bedding. In this way many of the rockshelters have flat ceilings ideally suited as painting surfaces. Interestingly, occasionally the ceilings are not so flat because they feature fossilised ripple marks preserved in the sandstone as the sand was deposited in shallow waters. Because slabs fall from the ceilings, there are often 'steps' in the ceilings and back walls due to this layered weathering. Sometimes paintings avoid these rock steps, while at other times large paintings may be placed over them and cross the irregularities. However, the existence of these rock steps results in vertically narrow, horizontally long panels and appears to have encouraged or permitted the painting of long, thin subjects such as snakes, beehives and fish. One subject that is popular on such ceiling steps is the scene of a group of small people together in lines or rows and I have previously illustrated examples of this in Kakadu National Park (Welch 1982: 25 and inside back cover). In the Kimberley these paintings survive as pigments that range in age from ancient monochrome rock-bonded reds (Figure 6), to fairly recent, thickly applied white, red and pink (Figure 7). Figure 6 shows simple 'stick' figures; the smaller ones appear to have no headdress and may represent children. The figure at the left has a simple waist decoration, larger headdress, and appears slightly further away from the others than is shown here. Figure 7 is painted on a smoke-blackened occupation shelter back wall/ceiling. On some of the figures, white and red pigments have been combined to form pinks which stand out brightly against the black background. Aboriginal informants have interpreted a row of people holding hands like this as dancing.

Figure 8 shows part of a line of fourteen or more simple human figures which have been painted in the same mulberry-coloured pigment as some 'bent knee figures' beside them (not illustrated). These are discussed in more detail, below. The elaborate bent knee figures are painted on a larger flat rock panel while these small, simple figures have been painted along a narrow ceiling step.

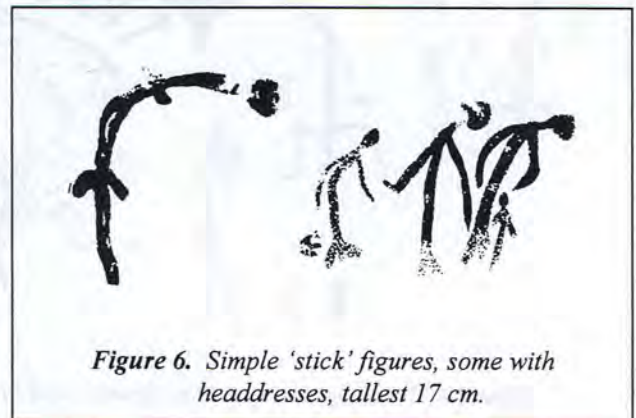


Figure 6. Simple 'stick' figures, some with headdresses, tallest 17 cm.



Figure 7. 'Stick' figures crudely painted in white, red and pink pigments, average 12 cm.



Figure 8. Female figures, 5 cm, with raised arms, mulberry hue.



Figure 11. Male and female figures, approx. 30 cm.

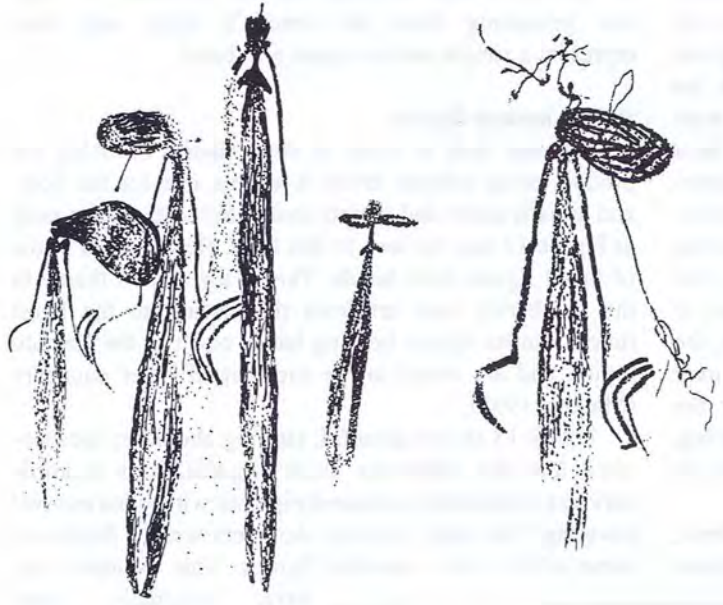


Figure 9. Small female figure without headdress in a group scene.



Figure 12. 'Stick' figures



Figure 10. Female figure, 33 cm, holding two boomerangs in a group scene.



Figure 13. 'Stick' figures with curvaceous shoulders, approx. 20 cm.

Female figures

Within the more recent 'Wandjina art period', individual female figures often appear with legs bent or in a squatting position, painted using white or yellow pigments (Fig. 2). Amongst the older paintings that survive as red bonded to the rock, individual female figures are rare, but are more common in group scenes. As we have seen, Figure 8 shows what appear to be females with protruding breasts and raised arms. Although these seem crudely painted they are in the same Mulberry colour as nearby 'bent knee figures' that are elaborately dressed and holding boomerangs in each hand. The females lack headdresses and body decoration. It is easy to dismiss the shape of the breasts as being due to rather clumsy painting. These figures are only 5 cm tall and so irregularities on the rock surface become magnified relative to the shape of the design. As well as this there may have been an intention to specifically portray large, pendulous breasts which are a feature of the older women.

Figure 9 shows a group 'scene' where a smaller female is depicted with arms raised to her head and both breasts and elbows protruding laterally. Other figures have headdresses, hold boomerangs and although no sexual organs are depicted, these are assumed to be male figures. The longer figure is ambiguous. This may be a taller human form, but another possibility is that it represents a ceremonial pole with hanging strings. Tall, decorated poles were used in certain ceremonies across Australia, including the Kimberley region. The lines over the right-hand figure are *string imprints*, either thrown or pressed onto the rock. Where superimposition occurs, the string imprints I have seen in the Kimberley appear over other paintings. Similarly, grass prints appear after the first paintings. Judging by the degree of weathering, Figure 9 was probably painted towards the end of the presumed period of straight part figures.

Figure 10 shows a female figure without headdress, brandishing one of two boomerangs. One may be inclined

to interpret this as if the female is fighting or hunting, but it should be noted that she is part of a 'scene' where other weathered figures have large headdresses and also hold boomerangs. One inverted figure disappears below the rock ledge. Aboriginal informants interpreted this 'scene' as women and men participating in a ceremony, dancing with boomerangs held in their hands. But of course dances and ceremonies in Aboriginal culture reflect aspects of day to day life, as well as containing myths and legends of ancestral people, plants and animals. So, the appearance of a person brandishing weapons may be the depiction of an actual aggression or the recreation of that aggression played out in a story. I am saying that a dance or ceremony is probably the subject when the human figures have large headdresses. This is supported by the views of present-day Aborigines also interpreting the art of earlier times.

Figure 11 illustrates the top section of faded male and female figures. The male has the larger headdress and the lines radiating from the female's head may represent hair or decoration such as single feathers or sticks. A small line projecting from the female's upper arm may represent a simple narrow upper arm band.

'Stick' human figures

We may tend to think of stick figures as being the product of an inferior artist. A simple line for the body and arms is quick and easy to make. Some examples such as Figure 12 may be seen in this light. Here, part of a row of faded figures hold hands. This is a common theme in the Kimberley rock art from the earliest to the latest times. Similar figures holding hands occur in the Kakadu region and are found in the rock art of other countries (Malaiya 1992).

Figure 13 shows graceful, curving shoulders incorporated into the otherwise 'stick' figures. This example survives in mulberry-coloured pigment with silica mineral covering. The high, curving shoulders were a feature of some of the early tasselled figures. This example may have originally been painted in bichrome, because there is pigment which suggests decoration may have existed beside one arm in two of the figures. If this were the case, they may have also held something in their hands.

Figure 14 shows stick figures, some with gaps in the red pigment indicating that they were originally painted in possibly two colours. These are painted over smaller, older figures whose remnants are seen centrally in the upper, middle and lower parts of the panel.

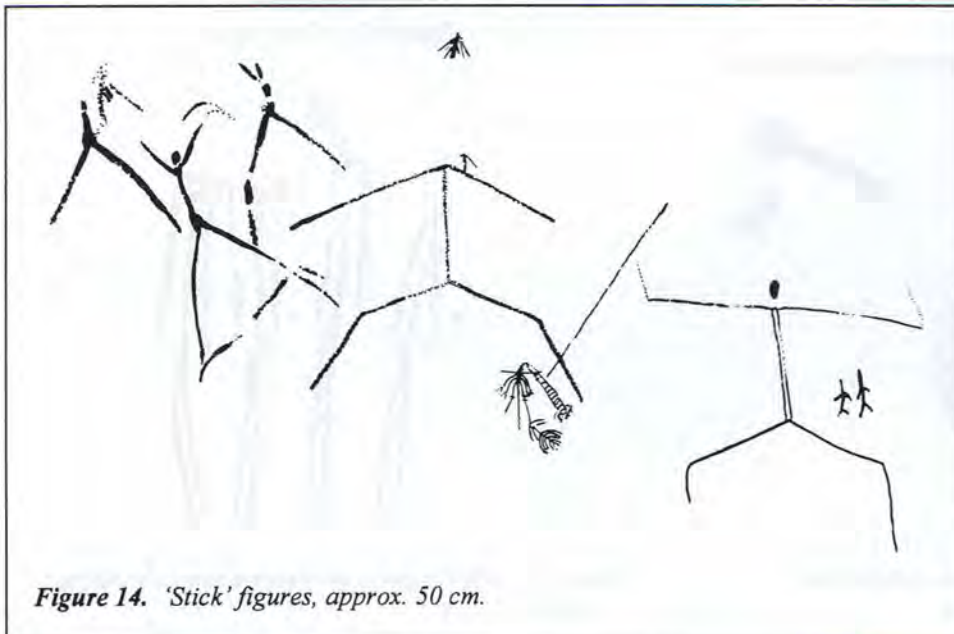


Figure 14. 'Stick' figures, approx. 50 cm.



Similar tall stick figures are found over a wide area of the Kimberley, from near the north-west coast where this example occurs, to Kununurra, 300 kilometres to the east.

Secondary 'stick' figures associated with primary elaborate figures

As discussed in relation to Figure 8, sometimes simple figures appear as *secondary* figures to the more elaborately decorated primary figure. Some 'stick' human figures were painted by the same artists who drew the elaborate tasselled figures. This is proven in Figure 15 where a single scene is painted in the one paint (as suggested by identical pigment residues) on a rock face. An elaborately dressed tasselled figure stands holding a 'branch' and a simple stick-like figure squats beside. The simple figure is unadorned and may have been intended to represent an onlooker or an uninitiated person at a ceremony being performed by the tasselled figure. Branches are often held and waved during Aboriginal ceremonies and this form is found on other tasselled figures (Welch 1993a: 31).

Plate 2 shows details of some of the one hundred-odd stick figures that are seen surrounding five tasselled figures in a panel illustrated in Welch (1993a: Fig. 3) and Walsh (1994: 134-7). In this case it is possible that these multiple stick figures may have been intended to represent a crowd of people who witnessed the main figures dressed up for ceremony. In some parts of the panel, the small figures appear contemporary with the tasselled figures, but in the majority it appears that they have been added later in a slightly different coloured and fresher-looking pigment. Some of them are painted over the



Plate 2. Detail of 'stick' figures painted over tasselled figures.



Figure 16. Elaborate and associated 'stick' figures, Kakadu National Park.

tasselled figures. If these stick figures represented a crowd scene that was painted close to the time of the tasselled figures, then the large number of people portrayed makes it likely that the tasselled figures were taking part in an 'open' ceremony, where all the members of the tribe could witness the events. However, if they were painted many years later, then such an interpretation becomes invalid.

Figure 16 is an example of secondary stick figures from near Hawk Dreaming in Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory. Here, a row of human stick figures, 12 cm to 14 cm tall, appear to be joined by, or

holding, a line which may represent a string. Above the line of stick figures are curved figures that were originally painted in more than one pigment. This scene may have represented part of an important ceremony that was once centred around the Oenpelli region. The curved back style of human figure is typical of that locality, and a similar scene with the curved back figures appearing over a long row of simple figures holding a line occurs on the other side of the East Alligator river (Mountford 1956: 152; Chaloupka 1993: 134-5). In the latter example, the human figures have been reduced to a circle and a single line to represent the head and body of over one hundred people (if we take each line to represent one person).

From the artistic point of view, these examples help to remind us that a good artist will often be capable of painting in differing styles, and some paintings we may feel belong to different groups or even time periods may have been made by the same artist.

Figure 17 is a discrete panel of figures all painted in the same mulberry-coloured pigment. Those to the left are readily identified as belonging to the bent knee figure group. However, to the right are a series of irregular lines and cruder, simple figures. The impression is that an accomplished artist was working on the left side of the panel, and another artist was ineptly working on the right, at the same time and with the same paint. Some of the lines appear



Figure 17. Simple figures associated with elaborate bent knee figures, tallest figure 56 cm.

as if there were attempts to remove them. The panel is too high above ground level for easy access by a young child. Another possibility is that the same artist intended to paint some simple figures as well as the more elaborate bent knee figures and in places he or she had tried to change the painting.

Simple figures with headdresses

Sometimes when simple figures are depicted, their only distinguishing feature is the headdress. Figure 18 shows two simple figures with stick-like bodies and headdresses, appearing empty-handed. These are interpreted by Aboriginal people from the area as being plants that grow like a creeper. One identification was *magabulla magabulla* (Ngarinyin language), a bean-like creeper. Another was *djunbu* (Kwini language), possibly the same creeper. When I pointed out the arms and legs on the figures the different informants had no difficulties in accepting their dual interpretation. One person said: 'He was a man. He was a man before. That's why he picked them fruit from the tree. That's why he's shown as a body.' Their understanding of the painting is that it represents a plant that was once of human form and so the combination of the plant and human elements is a natural process.

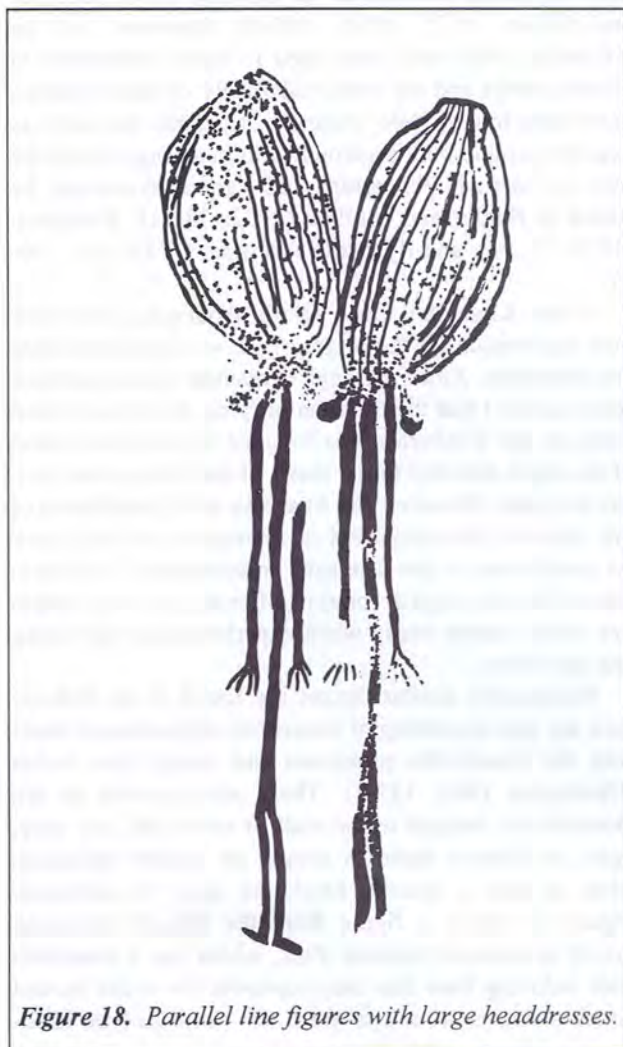


Figure 18. Parallel line figures with large headdresses.

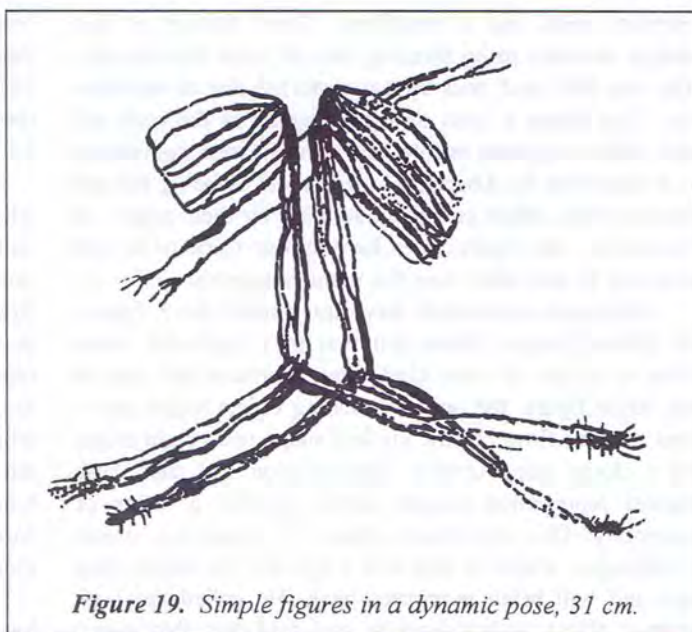


Figure 19. Simple figures in a dynamic pose, 31 cm.

Figure 19 shows another two figures, possibly empty-handed, facing each other and mirrored with outstretched arms and legs, possibly dancing.

Wananga headdress figures

Figure 20 shows a group of four figures, each with their body shape consisting of merely a single line which arcs across the available rock surface of a shelter ceiling. Each figure appears to have an ovoid-shaped head, rudi-



Figure 20. Simple figures with feather headdresses and one wananga headdress, 160 cm.

mentary arms, and a headdress. Three feather or leaf shapes are seen to be forming part of these headdresses. The two left hand ones appear distorted due to weathering. This shape is seen on other figures in the rock art, and when it appears on the Wandjina figures, sometimes it is identified by Aboriginal informants as being the tail feather of the black cockatoo. Judging by their degree of weathering, the figures seen here appear to be of an age that may be just older than the Wandjina period.

Aboriginal consultants have interpreted these figures in different ways. Some felt that they represent water lilies or a yam of some kind. One informant felt that on the larger figure, the open, branching object might represent an open flower while the leaf shape to its right might be a closed one. Another interpretation was that these figures represented people during *djunba*, a dance or ceremony. One informant called the branching object *yirdmindjal*, which he said was a sign for old people long ago and will bring memories back. He called the leaf-shaped object *wulgurdugurdu* and said that this meant that it 'brought your memories into your brains'. He said these represented headdresses that were made from human hair string or wool.

The smallest and largest figures each have a branch-like attachment as part of their headdress. Similar

branching objects are seen on the Kimberley 'straight part figures with missing pigment' (Welch 1990: Pl. 1, Fig. 33) and on figures in Arnhem Land and the Katherine river gorge (Chaloupka 1993: 126-9; Lewis 1988: Figs 75-7 etc.).

The largest of these figures has concentric circles at what appears to be just above the level of the head. It would be easy to dismiss this as simply a stylised depiction of this figure's head, except that we have the other figures beside it and they appear to have simple head decoration shown. It thus appears that the circular lines represent the lines of a real object as a form of headdress. Such an object may have been a *wananga* headdress which is a type of headdress made by first tying crossed sticks into position, and then tying string made from human hair or possum fur around the sticks in a spiral form. This was then decorated by painting with ochre, human blood, or attaching bird feather-down to the string.

In its simplest form the *wananga* is not made as a headdress, but rather as an item which is carried. This has also been called a 'thread cross' and 'thread star' and was once used in ceremonies across Australia from the Western Australian coast to western Queensland, New South Wales, and southern South Australia (Davidson 1937: 86). In central Australia the Arunta wore the objects on the head or back and they were very sacred and made only for closed ceremonies for initiated males (Spencer and Gillen 1927: 185-6, 190-4). However, in the Kimberley they have been used in open ceremonies in historic times and the most elaborately developed forms have been found. Here, complex structures are worn as headdresses and built up around a loop through which the face is inserted. Photographs of various types can be found in Baglin and Mullins (1972: 18-21), Robertson (1928: 17, 98), and Ryan and Akerman (1993: 111, 116-7).

In the Kimberley some of the Aborigines had their own explanation for the origin of the *wananga* decoration and headdress. Albert Barunga explained to Ian Crawford (pers. comm.) that the tradition of tying the string around sticks in the Kimberley was founded on the observation of the ropes attached to the masts of early ships that visited the coast. However, the Australia-wide distribution of this form of decoration and its appearance in early rock art would seem to pre-date such an occurrence. The basic form of the *wananga* decoration, after all, is a very simple one which comes easily when experimenting with string and any sticks.

Remarkably similar figures are found in the Kakadu rock art, also consisting of concentric circle-shaped heads with the branch-like projection and simple line bodies (Chaloupka 1993: 127-8). These also survive as red monochrome bonded to the rock. It would be very easy, again, to dismiss these as simply an artistic stylisation when in fact a specific headdress may be portrayed. Figure 21 shows a figure from the Mount Brockman massif in Kakadu National Park, which has a headdress with radiating lines that may represent the sticks around which string is wound to form the *wananga*-type head-



Figure 21. Simple figure with wananga headdress.
Kakadu, 84 cm.

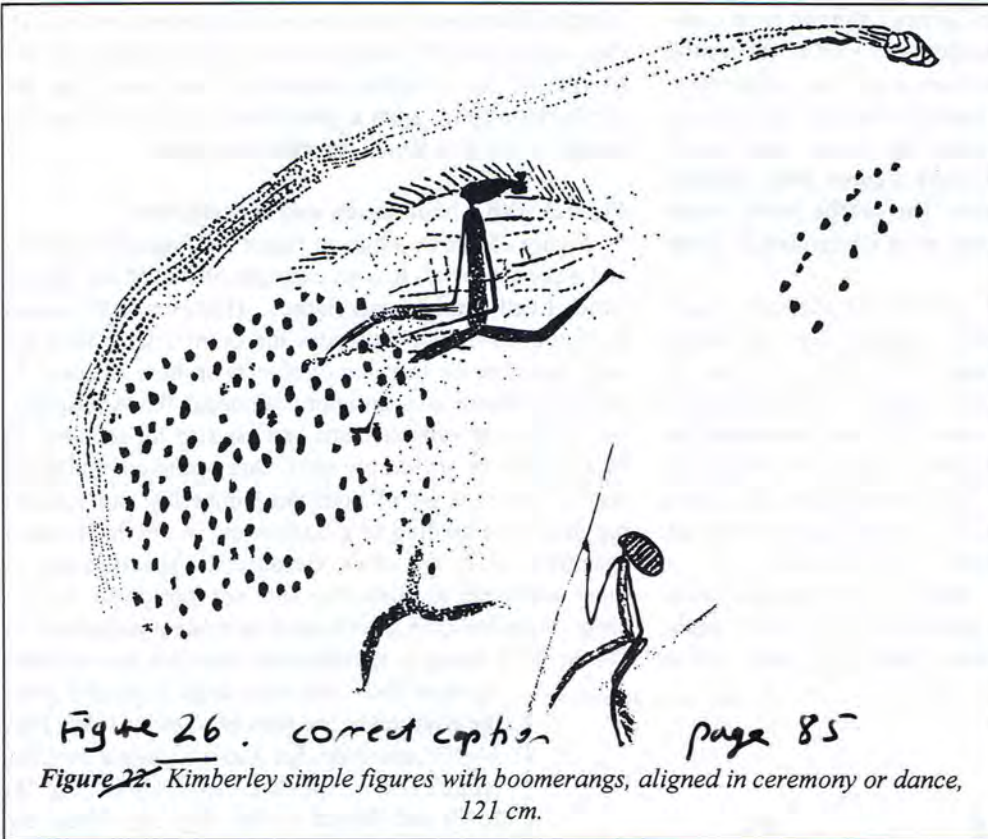


Figure 22. Kimberley simple figures with boomerangs, aligned in ceremony or dance, 121 cm.

throwers ('hooked sticks'). In the Kakadu region this branch-like projection is common on the 'simple figures with boomerangs' and these, too, often carry spearthrowers ('hooked sticks' or 'fighting picks'). Both sets of paintings appear to be of similar age and have been consigned to the middle of the variously proposed rock art chronologies. The projection takes various forms, at times looking like a branch with the leaves removed, while at others it could represent a ruffled feather plume. Certainly, branches and bunches of leaves are commonly held or tucked into armbands, leg bands and waist belts

dress. Although the *wananga* was known over a large part of Australia, it was not known in Historic times in the northern part of the Northern Territory (Spencer and Gillen 1927: 186). It is unknown in the Kakadu region, but this evidence reveals that either the headdress was made in the area in the past, or perhaps the knowledge of it or trade of it moved from southern areas to these northern regions at one time.

It is worth noting that in the Kimberley, the branch-like projection is commonly seen on the headdress of 'straight part figures with missing pigment', and these figures are closely associated with the carrying of spear-

during dances across northern Australia today. It is possible that these differences do represent different materials used. The object made was either held or inserted into a headdress and this was in vogue at that time. A photograph of a Kimberley man with what appears to be a ruffled feather plume similar to some drawn versions of this object is shown in Green (1988: 16).

Kimberley simple human figures with (headdress and) boomerangs

As mentioned earlier, a common theme amongst simple figures is to see rows of them, in frontal view, with headdresses, and carrying only boomerangs. Figure 22 shows a portion of an early panel of one kind of 'parallel line figure'. The figures are depicted with headdresses shown in both frontal and profile view, though their bodies remain in the frontal alignment. Some have short tassels from the head region and the two right-hand figures have what may have been longer triple string tassels with pigment now missing. One consultant suggested that

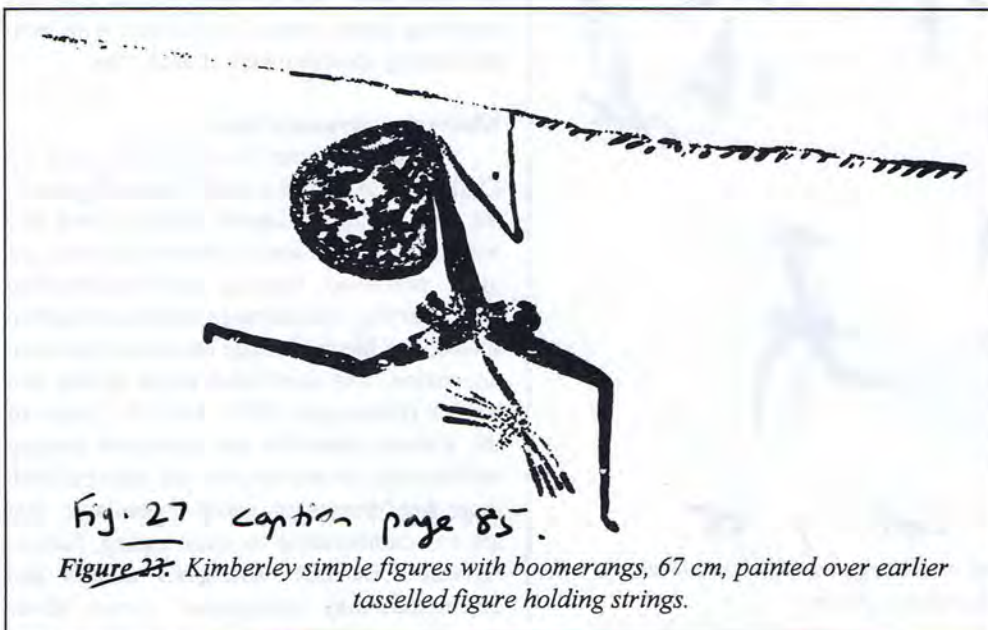


Figure 23. Kimberley simple figures with boomerangs, 67 cm, painted over earlier tasselled figure holding strings.

these figures could be either fighting, hunting or in ceremony. He thought that the headdresses seen in the frontal view may be *djangal*, made from cockatoo feathers that are split, tied to a stick and placed in the hair. He said that pendants made from kangaroo fur were once worn. Another informant felt that these figures were dancing because they wore headdresses. The profile forms showing that the headdress was long were interpreted as being the *ngadari* type.

Figure 23 shows similar figures with differing headdresses from the same shelter, painted over an earlier tasselled figure holding strings. The early examples of these Kimberley simple human figures with boomerangs often show the figures with more than one boomerang in each hand, as seen here, but later panels show them with just one boomerang in each hand, as in Figure 24. These figures have a bulbous headdress, short tassels from the head area again, and short tassels from the waist.

In the Kakadu region, figures with various headdresses are portrayed in a similar fashion with simple form and holding boomerangs, and have been called

'simple figures with boomerangs' (Chaloupka 1993: 127). One could use the same term for these figures in the Kimberley, but I believe, based on observation, that the Kimberley figures span a great time period, overlapping several of my previously described art periods.

Figures with a boomerang and spearthrower

Figure 25 shows a human figure holding a boomerang and a spearthrower. It is an example of one of the figures which I call 'straight part figures'. However, it is painted in simple form and illustrates the point I wish to make with regard to the carrying of objects in these 'scenes'. In regard to dance and ceremony amongst the Aborigines, one finds that various items are used to hit together as music sticks or are simply held. One of the combinations seen in the rock art of both the Kimberley and Kakadu regions is the holding of a boomerang in one hand and a spearthrower in the other. Because the spearthrower in these paintings is stick-like and not portrayed with a spear, there has been a reluctance to make a judgement in favour of it being a spearthrower and the neutral term

'hooked stick' has been used. Examples from the Kimberley are seen in Welch (1990: Figs 14-17) and from the Kakadu region in Chaloupka (1993: 126-30), Lewis (1988: Fig 78, 83-7) and Welch (1990: Fig. 34). Thus, the Kimberley examples of this combination have fallen more into the group I have now called 'straight part figures (with missing pigment)', whereas in Kakadu they have fallen into Chaloupka's 'simple figures with boomerangs' group, which is the same as Lewis's 'hooked stick period'. Essentially, in each of the chronological sequences for both the Kakadu and Kimberley regions, the figures with these stick-like spearthrowers are placed in the mid-region because they survive with red pigment bonded to the rock with minimal spalling. I believe some of the Kakadu art that has been interpreted as battle scenes is in fact depicting dance scenes, sometimes with people waving spearthrowers at each other.

Kimberley 'dynamic figures'

'Dynamic figures' is the term used by Chaloupka to describe early human figures in the rock art of the Kakadu National Park and western Arnhem Land. In that region they are often portrayed running with outstretched legs, carrying boomerangs and multi-barbed spears, and having a large headdress, thin arm decoration, and sometimes pubic aprons and bustles (Chaloupka 1993: 106-19). Some of the Kakadu examples are portrayed hunting and holding animals and yet are depicted with large headdresses or waist appendages that are too cumbersome to wear during hunting activities. Because Aboriginal dances and ceremonies may incorporate stories about

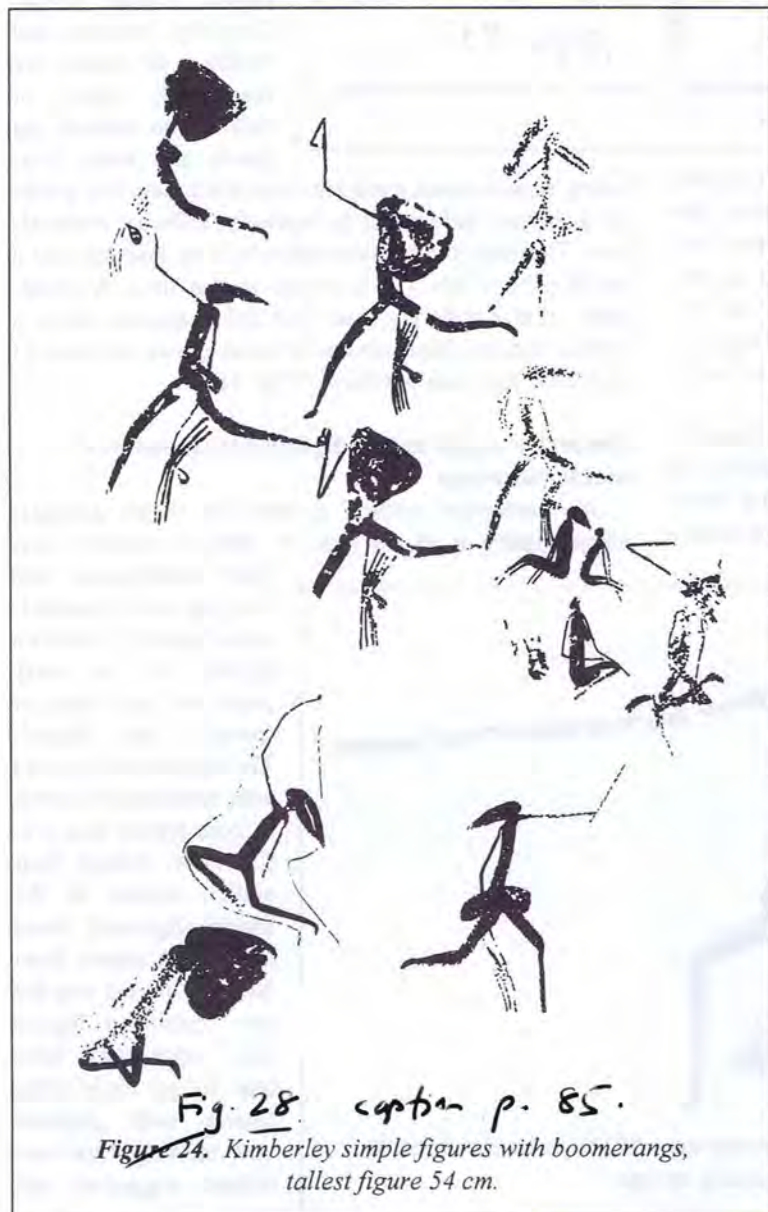


Fig. 28 caption p. 85.
Figure 24. Kimberley simple figures with boomerangs,
tallest figure 54 cm.



Figure 22: caption page 83.

Figure 25. Simple figure with boomerang and spearthrower, 19 cm.

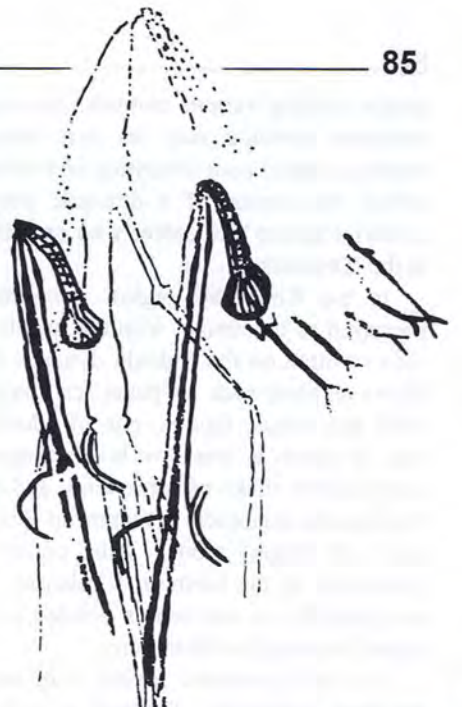


Figure 23: correct caption p. 83

Figure 26. Kimberley dynamic figures and finger dot painting, panel 103 cm wide.

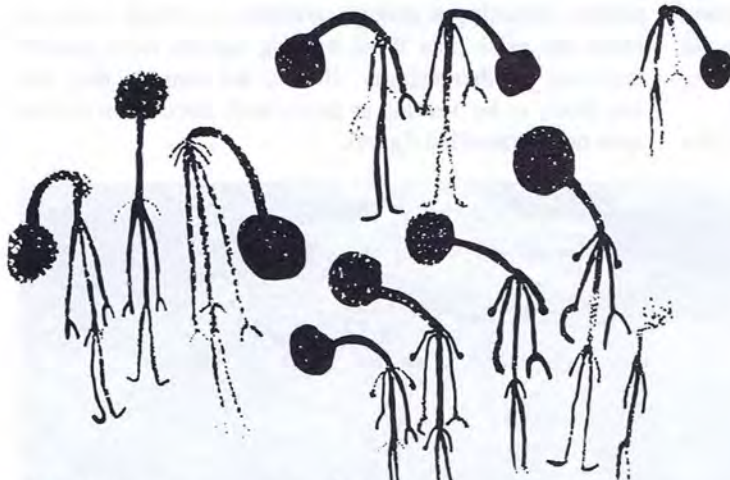


Figure 24 caption on page 84.

Figure 27. Kimberley dynamic figure, leg span 25 cm.



Fig. 25: Caption top left.

Figure 28. Kimberley dynamic figures, panel approx. 95 cm.



Figure 29. A tumbling/gymnastics scene, Kimberley, height 17 cm.

people hunting various animals, one explanation for this elaborate costume may be that some of these rock drawings depict people hunting and carrying out activities within the context of a dramatic play, or portray the ancestral heroes themselves who carried out these actions in the 'Dreamtime'.

In the Kimberley region some human figures are portrayed as if running, with the widely outstretched legs seen so often on the Kakadu dynamic figures. Figure 26 shows an early rock art panel featuring a snake with dot infill and simple figures, one of which has outstretched legs. It carries at least two boomerangs, possibly a spear and possibly sticks of some kind, and is more rigid than the Kakadu examples. A feature of this panel is the presence of finger prints. This practice appears more commonly in the northern Kimberley. The finger prints are generally in red ochres bonded to the rock and are placed in groups, as seen here.

In a well-protected shelter, high on a plateau in the northern Kimberley, I found a ceiling adorned with figures much more closely resembling the Kakadu dynamic figures (Figures 27, 28; Walsh 1994: 256-7). Figure 27 holds a single-pronged, multi-barbed spear in one hand and four boomerangs in the other. He has a large headdress and some body adornment around his waist. The running pose means the figure closely resembles the Kakadu dynamic figures, but it lacks the fine detail of leg and arm musculature so typical of the Kakadu figures.

Figure 28 shows some of the other figures from the

same panel. A group of running figures are seen, but there is no opposing group of figures. Figure 27 is below and to the left of these. Further to the left is a single kangaroo, not shown here, which may be the subject of their attention. Each running figure holds what was probably a small bag in the same hand that holds the boomerangs. This appears similar to a small string bag held by men in Arnhem Land, called a 'spirit bag', which contained several small items such as pieces of ochre, resin, a small flake knife or 'magic' stones such as quartz crystals. The bag was placed at the mouth and held between the teeth when a person was fighting (a photo of one is in Vanderwal 1982: 147). These figures have one arm raised and may have been throwing a spear or other object. Possibly a spear was drawn in a pigment that has since weathered away. The top figure has what may be a small spear-thrower near the hand. This is not clear. Two figures are shown as if sitting cross legged.

There is overpainting with well-preserved straight part figures and in some sections of the panel there is rock spalling. The degree of weathering of these figures would be consistent with them belonging to the earliest group of paintings during the period of the tasselled figures. This is because it is quite possible that the tasselled figures were painted depicting a certain ceremony or ritual, while at about the same time these running figures were painted depicting another activity. If they are running they are less likely to be wearing as much body decoration as that seen on the tasselled figures.



Plate 3. Tumbling/gymnastics scene, height 17 cm.

An early 'gymnastic' scene

Plate 3 (Figure 29) shows a group of people in various positions. It is weathered and survives in a dark-red ochre bonded to the rock, appearing to be of an age consistent with that of bent knee figures. The figure third from the left is positioned with its bottom higher than the ground level of the other figures. One leg has the knee bent, and is just above ground level while the other leg points upwards. The head is faded and the arms can just be seen in an outstretched position.

The figure fourth from the left is shown upside down, with both legs at the top bent 90 degrees at the knees and also flexed at the hips. The arms are both out straight and together, facing upper right. Two lines extending downward from the head probably represent two long plaits. I feel there can be little doubt that the artist is portraying people in the act of carrying out a somersault or cartwheel. This differs from random figures painted upside down on rockshelter walls, or several figures painted in a group with the uppermost ones being painted upside down in order to achieve the impression they are facing in toward each other. Here we have a complete sequence showing people portrayed as if dancing, running or tumbling on a level ground, even with a line drawn below in order to emphasise the point that they are on the ground. Then, appearing within that scene are people portrayed as if in a mid-air somersault or cartwheel. Although three figures may have long hair, it is of note that none are shown with any headdress or body decora-

tion. These would not be practical during such an activity. The word 'gymnastics', of course, is derived from the Greek word for the nude. Aboriginal people from both the Kimberley and Arnhem Land who have seen this drawing interpret it as a dancing scene and are surprised when the inverted figure is pointed out to them. Although children are often seen trying out cartwheels, it is not recognised as being a part of traditional Aboriginal dance.

Kangaroo/wallaby people

Figure 30 shows anthropomorphs with kangaroo-shaped heads, some in a contorted attitude. They appear in a weathered red and parts have been repainted in a pigment retaining a greyish colour. Aboriginal informants from the area interpreted these as depicting either a kangaroo totem since lost from the area, or kangaroos painted after a successful hunt. A kangaroo-headed person has previously been illustrated from another part of the Kimberley (Welch 1993b: 105). The important totems to people now living in the areas where these paintings survive are the crocodile, frog, and gum from a tree.

Kangaroos and wallabies are frequent in Aboriginal mythology throughout Australia and many dances and ceremonies have parts related to this theme. Across Arnhem Land one belief is that kangaroo people live amongst the rocks and only sniff food, but do not eat it (Gerry Blitner, pers. comm.). Sometimes the ancestral kangaroo or wallaby has human qualities and sometimes a legend describes how a man has changed himself into a kangaroo man.

One such kangaroo man arose near the Macarthur river and made the Roper River in south-eastern Arnhem Land (Spencer 1914: 337). Forms of this legend are found across Arnhem Land, with a male and female plains kangaroo creating the *lorrkgon* and *ubarr* ceremonies and establishing social rules and order (Chaloupka 1993: 54-5). These kangaroo ancestors are sometimes referred to as kangaroo people (Berndt and Berndt 1981: 267) and examples of rock art in the Kakadu region also contain a synthesis of human and kangaroo traits. For example Figure 31, from Kakadu National Park, features two kangaroos, one with bags hanging from the neck and arm.

The Arunta in central Australia relate a legend in which a kangaroo carrying a sacred *nurtunja* pole was chased by two men, one of whom belonged to the euro (a type of kangaroo) totem and changed himself into a kangaroo man (Spencer and Gillen 1927: 170). When performing initiation ceremonies, the Arunta tell the initiates about various kangaroo men and when a kangaroo is danced during these ceremonies, the performer, decorated with ochre and lines of birds' down, has a ball of fur string suspended from his waist which represents the scrotum of the kangaroo. During the dance the performer hops, moves and rests in the same way as a kangaroo (Spencer and Gillen 1927: 187-8). In one

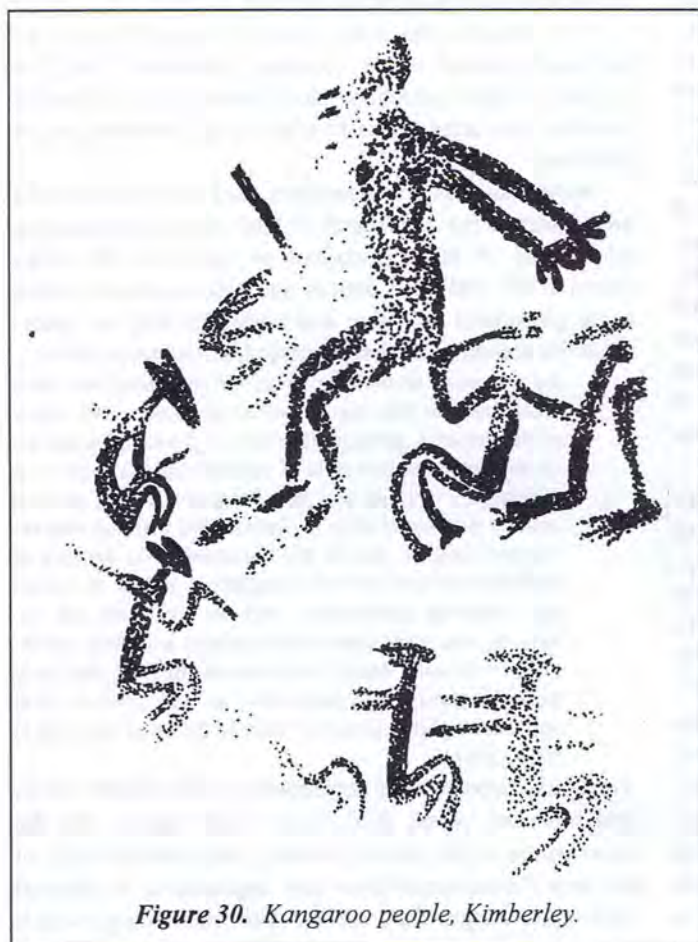


Figure 30. Kangaroo people, Kimberley.



Figure 31. Kangaroo people, Kakadu, panel 67 cm.

Arnhem Land description,

[W]henver wallaby is sung in the ... cycle of songs two men stand up and dance at one side. Sometimes they are joined by several others. The men hold their hands in front of their chests with the fingers pointed downward to imitate the posture of the front legs and paws of the wallaby. They dance jumping sideways as one often sees the wallaby move when frightened. At intervals they fall flat on the ground, remain there a moment, then arise and start the dance over again (Warner 1958: 269).

There seems to be almost no record of naturalistic masks of kangaroo heads or other animals being worn in ceremony. There is an owl mask worn during a ceremony at Maningrida in Arnhem Land (Murray Garde, pers. comm.). Rather, the performer's movements mimicked the animal, or body decoration such as the headdress symbolically represented the animal. Thus, if these ancestral heroes are the subject of these paintings, then it is likely that the artist has gone one step further than the performer has in the visual likeness of kangaroo people.

Paintings of kangaroo-headed people could represent actual people performing a ceremony or depictions of ancestral figures in this form. Given the above description, and using one's imagination as to how we might imitate a kangaroo or wallaby, look again at the figures in Welch (1990: Pl. 1 and Fig. 30) or Walsh (1994: Pls 69, 70 and 72). These figures adopt this stance and Walsh's Plate 70 shows the fingers drawn together which could be in imitation of a macropod hind foot print. In his colour plate, each hand has five long fingers drawn as parallel lines. But additional short lateral lines make the appearance take on the shape of a macropod hind foot. It is not clear whether the artist added too many fingers or whether the short lateral projections represent part of a

wrist decoration and the similarity is purely coincidental.

Are some simple figures night visions?

Many ceremonies were held at night and the white clay or white bird down used as body decoration reflected brightly the light from the fires. This brings me to an interesting interpretation for some of the simple figures in the art. Those with parallel lines, in particular, may represent night visions of these ceremonies when the body decoration is painted in vertical lines. In the darkness of the night and with the paint being on black skin, vertical white body lines would appear as they do on examples such as Figures 22 and 23. This was an idea that came to me before I had discussed it with Aboriginal informants. I was careful to ask open questions about the art. Pointing to Figure 22, I asked the question of Aborigines, 'Why are they painted in that way, do you think, like all lines?' One informant replied 'That's because they got the paint. They got the paint on themselves. You know, white ochre. That's why.' I asked, 'And if it was at night time, would they look like this?' 'Yes, if it was white, but not red one or yellow.'

Discussion

The figures discussed in this paper represent just a few of the many various types of simple human figures one encounters in the Kimberley rock art.

It is argued that many simple human figures are portrayed dressed up in costume. Sometimes they are aligned in rigid fashion, while at other times the people are seen with arms raised or with a high stepping gait or tumbling.

Australian rock art researchers need to be aware of the importance to the Aborigines of their dances and ceremonies. Some of these contained as many as 188 songs (Elkin 1979: 304) and dances and lasted several weeks, being performed both day and night. To help us understand the meaning of what is painted, allow me to quote:

As we move around the tribes we recognise that there are schools of dancing as well as of painting. We think of the graceful, gliding, lithesome, light-stepping mimetic and interpretative style of central Arnhem Land with the dancers in loose and free formation; of the precise, angular traditional style of Delissaville with the dancers massed together; and of the boisterous solo dancing of the Melville and Bathurst islanders in an arc of stamping, shouting participants; and so we could go on. Women, too, have their dance patterns and their reputations ... In most dances they do not lift their feet fully from the ground, but only move up and down on heel and toe, or glide one toe in front of the other foot (Elkin 1979: 298).

One early account of a corroboree in New South Wales told how the young men 'cover their heads with the snowy down of the white cockatoo, and when the light of the fires flashed upon them they appeared to be adorned with white wings. They carried their boomerangs, which

were also elaborately painted for the occasion' (Smith 1878: 172).

Across Australia bird down was used, while in the north native cotton from plants such as the Kapok bush (*Cochlospermum fraseri*) was stuck on the body with blood. At other times, various ochres or white clay were used to decorate the body.

Much of the rock art appears to be a synthesis of what was probably an enormous volume of cultural events in the forms of drama, dance and song, recorded in visual form, and allowing us to have an insight into the cultural diversity of early Australians. Following the discovery of the above Kimberley art, we can now add an apparent form of gymnastics to the repertoire of early Australian culture.

Acknowledgments

Thanks are due to the traditional custodians and the station owners who gave permission and allowed access to these art sites. Some of the people with whom I have discussed the rock art and who have helped me in my research for this paper include Scotty Martin, Paul Chapman, Phil Krunmurra, Billy King, Mary Pandilow, Manuella Punan, Gerry Blitner, Kim Akerman and Dr Ian Crawford. Thanks also to John Clegg and Ken Mulvaney who offered constructive criticism of the paper prior to the final draft.

Dr David Welch
2 Falcon Court
Wulagi, N.T. 0812
Australia

Final MS received 8 March 1996.

REFERENCES

- BAGLIN, D. and B. MULLINS 1972. *Aboriginal art of Australia*. Mulavon Pty Ltd, Belrose.
- BERNDT, R. M. and C. H. BERNDT 1981 (revised edition). *The world of the first Australians*. Lansdowne Press, Sydney.
- CHALOUPKA, G. 1993. *Journey in time*. Reed, Chatswood.
- CRAWFORD, I. M. 1968. *The art of the Wandjina*. Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
- DAVIDSON, D. S. 1937. *A preliminary consideration of Aboriginal Australian decorative art*. The American Philological Society, Philadelphia.
- ELKIN, A. P. 1979 (revised edition). *The Australian Aborigines*. Angus and Robertson, Sydney.
- GREEN, N. 1988. *The Oombulgurri story*. Focus Education Services, Cottesloe.
- KING, B. 1992. Unpublished letter to the Second AURA Congress, Cairns.
- LEWIS, D. 1988. *The rock paintings of Arnhem Land, Australia*. BAR International Series 415, Oxford.
- MALAIYA, S. 1992. Hand-in-hand dancing in Indian rock art and its continuities. In M. J. Morwood and D. R. Hobbs (eds), *Rock art and ethnography*. Occasional AURA Publication 5, Australian Rock Art Research Association, Melbourne.
- MOUNTFORD, C. P. 1956. Art, myth and symbolism. *Records of the American-Australian scientific expedition to Arnhem Land*, Vol. 1. Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.
- ROBERTSON, W. 1928. *Coo-ee talks*. Angus and Robertson, Sydney.
- RYAN, J. with K. AKERMAN 1993. *Images of power*. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
- SMYTH, R. B. 1878. *The Aborigines of Victoria* (Vol. 1). John Currey, O'Neil, Melbourne.
- SPENCER, B. S. 1914. *Native tribes of the Northern Territory of Australia*. MacMillan & Co., Ltd, London.
- SPENCER, B. S. and F. J. GILLEN. 1927. *The Arunta*. MacMillan & Co., Ltd., London.
- VANDERWAL, R. (ed.) 1982. *The Aboriginal photographs of Baldwin Spencer*. Introduced by John Mulvaney. John Currey, O'Neil Pty Ltd, Melbourne.
- WALSH, G. L. 1994. *Bradshaws*. Edition Limitée, Geneva.
- WARNER, W. L. 1958. *A black civilization*. Harper & Brothers, New York.
- WELCH, D. 1982. *Aboriginal rock art of Kakadu National Park, Northern Territory of Australia*. Big Country Picture Co., Darwin.
- WELCH, D. 1990. The bichrome art period in the Kimberley, Australia. *Rock Art Research* 7: 110-24.
- WELCH, D. 1993a. Early 'naturalistic' human figures in the Kimberley, Australia. *Rock Art Research* 10: 24-37.
- WELCH, D. 1993b. Stylistic change in the Kimberley rock art, Australia. In M. Lorblanchet and P. G. Bahn (eds), *Rock art studies: the post-stylistic era or: Where do we go from here?* Oxbow Monograph 35, Oxbow Books, Oxford.
- WELCH, D. 1993c. The early rock art of the Kimberley, Australia: developing a chronology. In J. Steinbring, A. Watchman, P. Faulstich and P. S. C. Taçon (eds), *Time and space*. Occasional AURA Publication 8, Australian Rock Art Research Association, Melbourne.