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THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF HUNTER-GATHERER ROCK ART

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A semiotic interpretation of art and myth is defended against the criticisms of Sperber (1975) and Dunbar-Clark & Travek (1974). Following Ricoeur (1979) the creation of rock art and the telling of myths are treated as performances or texts through which the structure of the performers' culture may be reconstructed and understood. Contrasts in the distribution, style and the frequency with which representations appear in particular rock art traditions are interpreted as symptomatic of differences in the structure of the cultures that produced them. It is argued that within any tradition, variety in individual performances (the narration of myth or painting of rock art) are the result of the distinctive relationship between structure and process characteristic of cultural systems.

This article reviews the cultural context of rock paintings and related myths among hunters and gatherers from Australia and southern Africa. It will concentrate on Australian material but will conclude by considering some of the contrasting features of rock paintings from a substantially different hunter-gatherer culture, that of the San bushmen of southern Africa. The rock art will be regarded as a series of 'texts' generated by a cultural system, embodied in the work of particular artists. Australian Aboriginal rock art is varied in form, and is a feature of many of the related cultural traditions that grew up in various parts of the continent.

In visual terms, Australian Aboriginal rock art traditions can be classified according to whether they utilise a geometric or silhouette style of representation. Geometric styles comprise a limited range of simple motifs such as circles, arcs and straight or wavy lines. Silhouette styles render humans and animals in terms of their bodily outline, viewed frontally, from one side, or from above, depending on the species. In her 1966 paper Munn distinguished between the art of the Warlpiri (central Australia) and the secular art of the Yolngu at Yirrkala (northern Australia) in terms of the range of meanings potentially conveyed by a single motif. Warlpiri motifs embody 'discontinuous meaning ranges' since a single motif can simultaneously represent a natural feature of the landscape, a camp site and the body of an ancestral hero. Yolngu secular art lacks this multivalency: a kangaroo motif may represent more than one species of kangaroo but this, in Munn's terms, is a 'continuous meaning range' since all possible meanings are varieties of kangaroo. Munn's semantic distinction broadly corresponds to the stylistic distinction made here between silhouette and geometric modes of representation.

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Geometric styles are widely distributed in Australia. Silhouette styles tend to be confined to coastal areas, although also occurring in south western New South Wales. A number of regionally distinct styles may be recognised within the silhouette category; the article will concentrate on the rock art of the Western Kimberleys (for ethnographic material on other areas, see Peterson (1972) on northeast Arnhem Land and Maddock (1970) on the south western margin of the Gulf of Carpentaria).

Despite the regional differences in art style, all Aboriginal cultures in north and central Australia share certain underlying features. In the secular sphere they are, traditionally, hunter-gatherer communities, foraging widely in flexible bands with changing membership. This flexibility was counterpoised against a relatively stable structure in the spiritual sphere. Aboriginal men and women belong to small descent groups (clans), each possessing a distinct body of spiritual property. Foremost among this is perhaps, a set of ‘sacred sites’: waterholes, rocks, caves and other geographic features imbued with the spiritual power of heroic beings who crossed the landscape during the creation period. Each clan’s sacred sites form one or more localised clusters delimiting a geographical zone which can be termed the clan’s estate (Stanzer 1965). The clan controls access to its sacred sites, although the estate is not an exclusive foraging territory. Associated with these sites are specific legends describing how they were created; specific songs and dances enacting these events and specific art
motifs depicting the legendary heroes in human or animal form which appear in body decoration, on sacred objects and as rock art. The heroes were at once human and animal: each clan has a totemic relationship with its hero’s animal progeny. Clans are linked by common religious traditions, by intermarriage, shared dialects and overlapping foraging rights.

In many parts of Australia, each hero travelled great distances, laying down ‘dreaming tracks’ which crossed the estates of more than one clan. A clan is thus often distinguished by the particular nexus of dreaming tracks which cross its estate and the distinctive legendary events which occurred within it. Each clan has pre-eminence rights over a particular section of a given track. Associated with this section are unique songs, legends and paintings. The situation in the Western Kimberleys is relatively unusual in as much as each clan has a unique hero whose track ends in that clan’s estate.

Ritual sequences, the telling of legends and painting are all vehicles for expressing the concepts of totemic religion. To understand how they operate it is necessary to consider the relationship between structure and performance in human cultures.

Sperber’s theory of symbolism
Sperber (1975) has criticised the ‘semiological’ approach to symbolism, but Sperber’s characterisation of the semiological method is a narrow one: ‘the explicit forms of symbolism are signifiers associated with tacit signifieds as in the model of the relationship between sound and meaning in language’ (1975: xi). It would restrict semiology to the definition of the linguistic sign (Saussure 1959: 66). This approach disregards Saussure’s analysis of the systematic quality of language in which signs are interrelated on two axes, the syntagmatic and the associative or paradigmatic: ‘In the syntagm a term acquires its value only because it stands in opposition to everything that precedes or follows it’ (1959: 123). Whereas ‘mental association creates other groups besides those based on the comparing of terms that have something in common; through its grasp of the nature of the relations that bind the terms together, the mind creates as many associative series as there are diverse relations’ (1959: 123). Both syntagmatic and associative relationships are relationships between sets of mental constructs or signifieds. Symbolism, I argue, describes a particular form of associative relationship. As Sperber writes, ‘symbolicity is not a property either of objects, or of acts, or of utterances, but of conceptual representations that describe and interpret them’ (1975: 112).

Syntagmatic and associative relationships in art and myth
It is possible to represent, in a very simplified model, the structure of Aboriginal clan totemism as follows. In the diagram, relationships between mental constructs are designated.
Syntagmatic relationships

Animal species:
- kangaroo
- python
- lizard

Social groups:
- Clan A
- Clan B
- Clan C

Natural features
of landscapes
- Billabong (where kangaroo
- long, winding creek bed (Python’s
- Spherical boulders
- lizard ancestor’s
- ancestor slept)
- eggs)

Sacred sites:
- ancestor slept

It should be noted that it is not necessary to assume that the connexion between a visual motif, or meaningful action, and the mental construct to which it relates is the same as that between signifier and signified in language (Layton 1981: 92 sqq.). It is however useful to propose that the elements from the ‘vocabulary’ of a culture can be linked together on two axes; the syntagmatic and the associative. On the syntagmatic axis elements of the same order are articulated by a ‘grammar’: clans are linked by marriage exchanges (cf. Goodenough 1965), art motifs are assembled into a composition. On the associative axis analogies are perceived between patterns of elements of different orders, such as clans and animal (totemic) species. Both Lévi-Strauss (1966: chapter 8) and Ardener, in his discussion of ‘P structures’ extend the concept of associative or paradigmatic relationships beyond the limited, technical sense defined by Saussure (Ardener 1980).

The simplest expression of syntagmatic relationships is to select one appropriate element to the exclusion of others. For instance, among the Alawa of the Gulf Country in the Northern Territory, each clan has a very limited range of body paintings. These designs are discrete and simple geometric forms. To wear another clan’s design without permission would be to steal their ‘land and life.’ There are a very restricted set of circumstances in which the wearing of another clan’s motif is permissible: if the two clans have formed an alliance, or if succession has taken place (see Bern & Layton 1984: 73–5 and compare Morphy 1977: 209–13). The Alawa also paint clan motifs in rock shelters as an assertion of ownership of the site, particularly where the design depicts the totemic hero who created the site. In myth, by contrast with much of the art, the relationships expressed may be far more complex, building into a narrative describing interaction between ancestral beings (see below). The article will consider why art and myth differ in this regard.

Associative relationships define the way in which the parallel structures of these ‘vocabularies’ are cognitively inter-related: each clan is associated with a unique set of sacred sites, totems, and so forth. Such relationships are expressed in myth through the transformation of the ancestor into animal, or sacred object, or feature of the landscape (Munn 1971). Associative relationships are also expressed in geometric art traditions. Each clan would be associated with a distinctive motif.

The special capacity of geometric art styles is to represent an associative set in a single motif, as Munn showed in her analysis of Warlpiri sacred art (e.g. Munn
Thus, in figure 2, the arc which is clan A's exclusive design would simultaneously depict the kangaroo hero in his camp (the arc reproduces the mark a person leaves after sitting cross-legged in the sand) and the billabong which now forms the site. The motif also denotes the wearer of this design in ritual as a member of clan A².

Two cases from my own fieldwork data illustrate the multivalency of geometric motifs. In one instance, a clan legend relates that one ancestor attempted to cook another at a site on the clan’s estate. This site is pitted with holes which are the remains of the earth oven where the deed was committed. Beating the site with green branches will release the cooked ancestor’s creative power and propagate his animal descendants. The clan painting, composed of circles, simultaneously represents the cooked ancestor’s eggs and the oven at the site where he was cooked. In the second instance, the song cycle describes people in the creation period hunting and skinning the animal species identified with that group’s totemic hero. Later I was told that the two vertical lines of paint initiates of this clan wear in ceremony represent the marks left on the animal’s body when it is skinned. Two long cracks in an exposed rock are the same marks, left when the prototypical creature was skinned. Later again, I learned that the song is sung when the physical operation of initiation is carried out, and that the stone knives used to conduct this operation are those the ancestors used to skin the original animal. Thus social status, both as members of a local group and as initiated adults, foraging activities and the natural features of the landscape are all bound into a single associative set of which the body painting is one expression.

To consider one of Sperber’s examples, how might the mental construct BUTTER characteristic of Dorze culture be signified? Linguistically, by referring to butter in myth or song. Visually, by depicting butter in pictures. Or, and this is how the Dorze do it in ritual, by using butter itself to decorate the body (see Ardener 1971: xlii–xliii). However, to understand the mental construct BUTTER we must see how it is related syntagmatically to other items figuring in ritual and nutrition, such as meat (Sperber 1975: 53), and how they stand in paradigmatic relationships with items in other realms of culturally mediated experience, as Sperber illustrates in his discussion of the cognitive, symbolic associations of the distinction MUCH BUTTER—LITTLE BUTTER in the economic, sociological and physiological domains of Dorze culture (1975: 54, 56, 68–70): ‘The existence of homologous oppositions brought together by
diverse rituals and texts, contributes to the formation of a coherent scheme of Dorze ritual and social life' (70; cf. Ardener 1980, especially: 305, 308).

Dubinskas and Traweek have recently criticised Munn's approach to Warlpiri art, arguing that Munn (1971: 158; 1973: 211) regards graphic motifs as a means of establishing bridges between the otherwise closed, individual worlds of the Warlpiri. Dubinskas and Traweek respond that Warlpiri identity is wholly a product of their social experience. Munn, in the words chosen by Dubinskas and Traweek, treats graphic signs as signifiers which 'stand for . . . a something which is meant by the person who uses the sign' (Dubinskas & Traweek 1984: 16). Yet they respond: Warlpiri do not decode or interpret designs as representing something other than themselves, rather they are directly affected by them (25). Even if this is a valid criticism the thoughts of the Warlpiri are not directly accessible to us (or to one another). We, as anthropologists, must consciously analyse the significance of words and designs the Warlpiri apprehend without reflection and it is this analysis which Munn has carried out.

Paintings in rock shelters are only one expression of Aboriginal art. The same art traditions often appear in body decoration, bark paintings, designs on the sand of a ceremonial dance ground and on log coffins. The particular interest of rock art is two-fold: sheltered from the weather it is durable, and it remains where the artist put it. For this reason rock art tends, for Aboriginal people, to become imbued with many of the values associated with the totemic landscape: those of a lasting record of ancestral activities, and may therefore provide a convenient marker of a site’s totemic affiliation. Equally, spatial relationships become particularly significant for the outside observer. Both the internal composition of a decorated surface, and the geographic location of the decorated site, may preserve information about the structure of the artist’s culture.

In a non-literate culture the telling of a myth is a transient performance but has the complex structure of spoken language to rely on in expressing relationships. A painting is more durable, sometimes lasting for several days if it is placed on the body of a dancer in ceremony continuously to announce his role, sometimes in the case of rock art lasting for centuries. A painted composition, moreover, expresses relationships simultaneously whereas in a spoken narrative relationships unfold through time (Humphrey 1973: 19). On the other hand, the structure of an artistic system generally seems to lack the richness of spoken language. It does not appear to be possible visually to express such complex relationships. Thus art and myth may tend to perform complementary functions. Although a myth, once recorded by the anthropologist, becomes in Ricoeur’s sense a text, only art has this quality within the life of the indigenous, non-literate culture.

Structure and performance

Despite the fact that social scientists think of social structure as something relatively constant, ensuring that our analysis has some validity over time and is not just momentarily true, we cannot predict actors’ future behaviour. Despite
the difficulty of prediction it is axiomatic that social interaction is only possible because actors' expectations are realised, and because rights and duties are recognised to last through time. To resolve this paradox it is necessary to consider the relationship between the structure of a cultural system and the performance of social life. As Fortes wrote, 'When we describe structure we are already dealing with general principles far removed from the complicated skein of behaviour... that constitute(s) the tissue of actual social life. We are, as it were, in the realm of grammar and syntax' (1949: 58). Performance is characterised by making selections from the vocabulary of culture, by composing sequences of action, or by construing associations between different areas of cultural experience. In a similar fashion, playing a game such as football or tennis depends on the application of a limited set of rules to construct an endless series of actual events, or contests, whose outcome depends on the skill and tactics of the players. It is such skills which introduce the element of unpredictability in cultural behaviour (see Layton 1985).

Grammar is a property of the syntagmatic axis. It is the crucial, creative tool that allows us to generate diverse and original sequences of human social action (cf. Ardener 1980; Ricoeur 1979: 81–2, 99). To contemplate a grammar of symbolism (Sperber 1975: 82–3, 90) confuses the properties of the two axes.

There is, however, also scope for creative thought, within the framework of a particular cultural heritage, along the paradigmatic axis: 'we have to ask not only what imaginative possibilities are afforded to individuals by that symbol, but whether, in what direction and how far they take up those imaginative possibilities' (Toren 1983: 267; see also Layton 1981: 128, 179).

Ricoeur characterises language as a structural system, to be explained by structural analysis in terms of the internal relationships among its component signs. Discourse, he argues, is on the other hand always about something, and must be understood in terms of what it refers to. Discourse is of two types: spoken language is a 'fleeting event' which must be understood in terms of the speaker's particular, subjective intentions. Once written down, discourse ceases to be a transient performance and becomes a text. Readers cannot refer back to the writer's subjective intentions to understand the text. Instead, a text is understood by construing the 'possible world'—the culture—it discloses: 'we speak about the "world" of (Classical) Greece, not to designate any more what were the situations for those who lived them, but to designate the non-situational references which... will henceforth be offered as possible modes of being' (1979: 79). According to Ricoeur, Lévi-Strauss's structural analysis explains the internal structure of myth, but does not provide an understanding of it in use. We understand myth by appreciating what the performance, or recorded text is about (96–7). Although our guesses at interpretation 'are closer to a logic of probability than to a logic of empirical verification', there is a limited field of possible constructions, some more probable than others (90–3). Ironically, Lévi-Strauss criticised Radcliffe-Brown in very similar terms, maintaining that he failed to distinguish between social structure, a static model, and social relations, the ongoing process of actual social interaction (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 296).

Despite what Ricoeur writes about overcoming the subjective intentions of a
text’s author, it may be that the subjective purpose of the narrator of a myth, discernible through the particular form his performance takes, will reveal something about the character of the culture, and the actor’s place within it (Leach 1954: 265–6; Kaberry 1957: 47). Further, the text-like quality of rock art may allow it to outlive the artist’s culture and eventually become incorporated into a new, perhaps radically different, culture that succeeds the first, so that there is no necessary connexion between the meanings now attributed to it, and its significance to the original artists. This appears to have happened in the case of the Mimi and Bradshaw figures discussed below.

Legend and rock art in the Western Kimberleys

The principal ‘tribal’ groupings of the Western Kimberleys comprise the speakers of three languages, Worrora, Wunambal and Ngarginyn. Worrora and Ngarginyn together comprise approximately thirty clans (Blundell 1980). Each clan holds a bloc of land, its estate or dambima (Worrora), but in traditional times members of the clan would have moved seasonally between coast and interior. At the end of the dry season, however, clansmen were drawn back to their estate to perform increase rites at painted rock shelters (Blundell & Layton 1978: 238).

Each clan is a patrilineal descent group. Each belongs to one of the two patrimoieties called Arbulari and Arungari, which are common to the Worrora and Ngarginyn. The moieties are exogamous, and clans are linked by regular marriage alliances (Blundell & Layton 1978: 232–3) in a fashion which resembles the patrilateral cross-cousin marriage alliances described by Rosman and Rubel (1971) for the northwest coast of North America. Women are transferred in marriage between clans in a sequence which creates a chain of alliances.

These marriage alliances are thought of as part of a wider system of ceremonial exchange called the wunan. The wunan has two components: the idea that social groups are fixed about the landscape in a constellation of positions relative to one another, and the idea that such groups are interrelated by exchange of various kinds: the exchange of ritual objects, the bestowal of women in marriage and presentations of artefacts; all of which may be seen as performances in the idiom of the culture (Blundell & Layton 1978: 231 sqq.; Blundell 1980: 109–112; 1982: 6–7, 11–12).

Pre-eminent in Worrora and Ngarginyn religion are the Wandjina, heroic ancestors depicted in cave paintings, who established the clans. Each clan has its own Wandjina. Dreaming tracks in the Western Kimberleys are relatively short. They simply trace the route a Wandjina took to his final resting place in his clan’s territory, or else the routes ancestors followed between the neighbouring territories during the heroic events which led up to the establishment of the present social order.

The fixed arrangement of the clans which is part of the wunan is seen primarily in the location of their estates. These are signalled by the clan’s decorated caves, containing paintings of their Wandjina and of the animals and plants associated with these ancestral heroes. Each estate also has spirit centres where children are
Figure 3. Silhouette figures. (a–d) Western Kimberleys. (e) Kakadu region.
(a) Wandjina head and torso; breadth of head, 30 cm. Puntagen road 35 km. from Mt. Elizabeth Old Homestead.
(b) Crocodile, showing eggs within body; length 95 cm. On Drysdale River near Puntagen road crossing.
(c) Dingo. Length c. 100 cm. Blundell site LR-4, Napier Range.
(d) Capricious figure adjacent to head of rock cod (a totemic heroine), length of capricious figure c. 10 cm. Ngumbari shelter near mouth of Doubtful Bay.
(e) Figure of hunter in Mimi style using spear and spear thrower to hunt bird. Ngarradj-Warde-Djokkeng shelter, West of Kakadu National Park.
conceived, and rock formations said to have been made by the Wandjina when they transformed the countryside, to leave a record of their activities.

Besides the Wandjina, there are other figures in Worora and Ngarinyin cosmology. Both cultures acknowledge a pair of moiety heroes, albeit under several names, and both recognise a supreme being called by the Worora, Ngadjii ya (‘first being’). Finally, there is a set of capricious or malevolent beings who live in the bush, who are neither human nor spirit (general accounts of Western Kimberley cosmology include those of Capell 1939; 1960; Elkin 1930; Lommel 1961; Love 1930; 1935; Jensen 1963).

Both the Wandjina and the capricious or malevolent beings left rock paintings. Often they occur in the same shelters. The paintings can be seen to express two opposed themes in the culture of the Western Kimberleys.

The Wandjina are concerned with the establishment of social order: the creation of estates; their demarcation by means of standing stones and decorated caves; the establishment of social relationships between clans through the founding of the wunan. They have totemic associations: either the Wandjina was an animal, he became one on dying or he made (or named) a natural species. In pre-contact times (until about 1920) the Wandjina were commemorated in clan totemic ceremonies, in which each clan propagated its own totemic species. Clan interdependence was integral to the ethos of the Wandjina cult.

The concept is expressed in one man’s description of his clan’s Wandjina, the Native Bee Aynangga. Sam Woolagudja related how the Bee made honey (‘sugarbag’) ‘travel all over the world by wunan, like a steamer going from one island to the next delivering stores . . . wunan works as long as you have a good heart’. A second Worora legend, that of the Araluli clan, deals with marriage exchanges. In this legend, the interruption of exchange leads to the Wandjina’s downfall (Blundell & Layton 1978: 242–3; see also Crawford 1968: 54–7).

Three texts

In the papers cited, Leach and Kaberry have commented on the impossibility of obtaining an ideal, or standard performance of a myth. The following section presents three narrations of a myth from the Western Kimberleys. The central site of this important story, called Wanaliri, lies in Ngarinyin country on Gibb River Station. This widely known story (see Crawford 1968: 38–42) describes how some children mocked a young owl by plucking out his feathers and challenging him to fly. The owl escaped to his father, the Wandjina called Wodjin, Galaru or Wanalari, who punished the people by leading the other Wandjina against them in a battle which ended when a flood drowned the people. In some versions the Wandjina then dispersed and settled in their respective estates, making and decorating their caves, and establishing the wunan to keep in contact with one another. Three texts of this legend, collected while Valda Blundell and I were working at a camp on the Drysdale River, follow (see Blundell 1982: 5).

Collier Bunngmowew: Two children played with an owl. They took away its feathers and threw it up in the air. It fell backwards. Magurguri, the ‘Bicycle Lizard’ told the Wandjina, Wanaliri, all the
people were playing with the owl. Maguriguri picked up Dandu the owl and took him to the Wandjina, who believed him then. Maguriguri gathered together the Mangurayi tribe of Wandjina (the 'creek' or inland people). They all talked on a round hill. 'What shall we do?' they asked each other. This is Waddy Ngerdu's song. The Wandjina painted themselves with white paint. The chief man pulled out the whiskers of his moustache and threw them into the sky. They made a little cloud. When he did it again the cloud grew, and the rain came. The chief Wandjina told the others which way to go.

'Who's this coming?' the people said. The Wandjina threw Didigurri, the short-necked turtle, at the people. The wind spun around on one place. The people couldn't escape. The plains kangaroo Mangura ran up to the people. One woman and two men grabbed his tail and escaped. The Wandjina lay down, resting on one elbow, and beat the ground with a stick. He made the flood come.

Mount Barnett is the cave where the Wandjina finished up.

The Wandjina can't go walkabout now: he made the woman. Woman is something like the government supplying food to cattle stations. Spears are sent by woman. Boys are given things from the wunan track when they are going to become men. Maguriguri takes red ochre, white ochre, boomerang and spear from one Wandjina to the next. (C.B. draws circles, linked by a line, to illustrate the home of each Wandjina visited by Maguriguri.)

Maguriguri has a black chest and white stripes on his cheeks. He painted himself when he took the news to the Wandjina.

On top of a hill, opposite the Barnett Gorge junction, you can see a row of stones. That's Kayoya the crocodile standing up. After the fight at Wanabi. He was asking 'Where will we go?' He finished up at Mann Gorge.

Jack Wera: Two boys found a young owl. They played with it; they plucked its feathers out, put a stick up its nose and chuckled it in the air. 'You try and fly this time', they said. The second time it went up in the air. The two boys watched: it didn't fall down. For three days there was lightening all round. After two more days there was cloud all around, with a little cloud right in the centre. A big wind started. Everybody was racing around. A little rain fell.

All the Wandjina were right at Wanami. The long-necked turtle, the brogla and the water goanna were the weapons of the Wandjina; also the crocodile and the lizard. One mob was the local mob; others came from another tribe. Maguriguri the lizard came along on the hill. He told the Wandjina where the people were. Another lizard, or a bird, didn't want to tell him.

The Wandjina said, 'I can't drown all the people'. The other Wandjina were asking him to do it. After a while he said, 'We'll go down and see them people'. There was a big wind and a bit of rain. They had a fight. Every time the Wandjina was hit with a spear, water came out. The Wandjina used the crocodile and turtle (as weapons). He also used pandanus as a spear; that's how pandanus got its spikes. The brogla had her weapons wrapped in bark. She was running around, making the ground loose and boggy.

Whichever way the people ran, the Wandjina chucked his whiskers and brought them back. The brogla took all the weapons she had and fought. Everyone ran away. They knew they would be drowned. The sky was covered with clouds. A little white wallaby called Mangura, a mother one, grabbed two boys. They hung onto her tail and she ran away until the sunshine came through. The other people all ran into a hollow box tree which shut itself on them. Some ran into a cave, and the cave closed on them. You can see the place, a swamp, where the battle took place.

After the battle all the Wandjina separated. They went to Mount House and Kunmutnga, Panangan, Doubtful Bay, Munja. That's how they put all the paintings around there (in rock shelters). Crocodile and kangaroo paintings. That's where they ended up. That's why you can see all the water running there all the time. They put everything; yams . . . and that's when they started the woman.

George Jonari: Children made fun of the owl, threw him up into the air. He flew off and hit the sky. The children forgot about him. The people lit a fire to drive kangaroos out of the grass. They ate wild honey. They saw a little cloud come out. Nobody thought anything about it.

They saw a man coming down from the hill. 'It's a Wandjina!' they said. Everybody rushed to get their spears. There was a big fight. They hit the Wandjina in the chest. Water came out.
*Kurangali* the brolga came down. The children grabbed the tail of the kangaroo. They found a cave called Fox Hole Cave to shelter in. The Wandjina came. The children stayed there.

Wanalirri belongs to the Buraluma *damhina* (estate). Children, even young fellows, are not allowed to kill owls round here.

Each version may be regarded as a performance of a work which is part of the local cultural heritage; two are rich in detail, the third is not. In all versions associational relations are expressed between geographical features, animals and plants, people and Wandjina. In Collier’s version the syntagmatic structure of clans linked by ceremonial exchange is made clear. Jack concentrates on the parallel structure apparent in the distribution of clan estates, marked by the presence of paintings and springs. (Clan water sources are also child spirit increase sites; see Blundell 1982:9). Collier and Jack differ on the precise way in which the flood was unleashed. Jack dramatises the chief Wandjina’s role by depicting him in dispute with his followers over execution of the punishment and, likewise, contrasts Magurigiri with the animal who did not want to betray where the people were camped. (In the version told by David Mowaljarli four birds sent to spy out the people’s camp, the honey sucker, eagle, captain bird and bower bird, all feel sorry for them and refuse to return to the Wandjina.) George Jomari’s version is altogether simpler: a just-so story whose moral is: don’t kill owls. It does not necessarily imply that George is a less competent performer. Versions of the latter type are typical in situations where the teller either is not entitled, or does not wish, to draw out more profound implications of a legend’s structure (cf. progressive revelation of associative relationships in the animal hunting episode, above). The complex structure of the myth facilitates variation in successive narrations.

Stanner has compared alternative accounts of a myth from another Aboriginal community, the Murinbata, finding that ‘free imagination and human insight, while still obeying the canons of the situation, may greatly change the emphasis and tone of a myth and may even change its content’ (1961: 237). There was no definitive account, and each version came to seem ‘a momentary convention’ (248). Stanner concluded that artistic criteria were used by narrators in selecting from the stock of possibilities (251).

**Rock art**

Rock art expresses elements of the cognitive system in a distinctive manner. Blundell argues that the artistic system can be analysed independently of myth (1982: 4).

Wandjina paintings have a characteristic style and are executed in a characteristic technique: the figures are delineated in red on a white ground, with (in the case of modern barks) further white paint sprayed onto the red. Wandjina do not have mouths. Animals accompanying these motifs are characterised by a particular form of twisted perspective, in which heads are shown with the eyes close together, separated by a line running to the nose, and the ears positioned twisted through 90° in relation to the orientation of the eyes. Limbs are stiff and straight, while the anus is prominently depicted, also through the use of twisted perspective.
The word which in Worora refers to having a totemic relationship with an animal is the verb *gi*. Thus the Aralulinya clan *gi*, the white-breasted sea-eagle while the Lariniya clan *gi*, the native bee. The word *gi* can be translated as 'copy' (Sam Woolagudja) or, alternatively, 'follow' (Alan Rumsey, pers. comm.). Woolagudja viewed retouching rock paintings of the heroes and acting socially in the ways the Wandjina laid down as two aspects of copying the ancestors. On two occasions he stated that 'To *gi* is like blowing that white paint onto the rock'. This, as Crawford (1977: 326) and Blundell (1982: 13–14) have recorded, is the first stage in making a Wandjina-style painting. The concept is reminiscent of Munn's finding that the Warlpiri consciously compare following the tradition of the Tjukurrpa with tracking an animal in the desert (Munn 1964: 90). One way of maintaining the traditions is by depicting the marks the ancestors left on the landscape in paintings.

An important part of the Wandjina cult was the duty of each clan to have the paintings in its caves retouched, to ensure a general supply of the natural species represented there. Each group relied upon the other clans of the West Kimberleys to provide the continuous supply of those species not represented in its own galleries (Blundell 1974: 222). In the act of retouching its paintings each clan expressed its place in the system of relations articulated by the wunan. Each repainting is, in other words, a performance within the idiom of the artistic system. On rare occasions an entirely new Wandjina painting may be put up (see Blundell 1982: 16–17). Each shelter, however, tends to be dominated by single representations of Wandjina or representations of a particular totemic species. There are no narrative scenes.

The capacity of Kimberley rock paintings to express cultural themes is nonetheless enriched by the fact that in the same shelters occur paintings of another category of beings: the malicious and capricious creatures already mentioned. Nandjala-nandjala and Wurulu-wurulu are capricious figures. Nandjala-nandjala propagates yams in the bush. He is active during the season called Wiulgunjiri, at the end of the Wet. The Wurulu-wurulu steal honey from the nests of native bees. Neither is considered to be a spirit: they are diminutive, human-like creatures whom one hardly ever sees, but who leave evidence of their activities behind them.

A gula is an evil spirit. He has long ears, and is equated with the Christian devil. Lulunja is the human counterpart of A gula; he is the evil person. Sam Woolagudja expressed the paradigmatic relationship inherent in the concept, saying: 'Lulunja, he looks like A gula. Lulunja steals things: blankets, money, anything big. When people are bad and steal, that's Lulunja'. He went on to ascribe this kind of behaviour to people who lacked the awareness of wunan: 'People are fighting because they haven't got wunan . . . if you're fighting and you get wunan you say, Oh, I'm in the wrong road'. He described how thieves could be caught by magic, using a bent stick which crippled their limbs.

The paintings of these figures are executed in monochrome, in a flat frontal perspective with no interior details and with distorted limbs. They are often inverted in relation to the Wandjina motifs.

Nandjala-nandjala and the Wurulu-wurulu differ most significantly from the Wandjina in having no fixed home. They are no-one's totemic ancestors, but
roam freely about the bush and while they do so, disfigure the Wandjina caves by 'making a mess' over the ancestral paintings. According to Andy Marlam, another Worora man, they paint with their penes. The notion of a creature who wanders through the bush painting indiscriminately in Wandjina caves is quite antithetical to the order of the wunan. As Sam Woolagudja said in front of one of these paintings, 'The Nandjala--nandjala put them there themselves, making fun of the Wandjina. In the early days (when people lived out in the bush), you couldn't paint in a cave that wasn't in your country. Those devils are round the Wandjina in the cave just like they're round people in the camp: they're making fun of him, that Wandjina'. The little figures are grotesque, with twisted limbs not unlike, perhaps, the thieves punished by sorcery. On another occasion I asked Sam to draw Wurulu-wurulu, and asked him about the figure's appearance. 'You might say: Why do you mock that bloke?' Sam replied. 'I spoil his leg, I spoil his knee-part; make him not like a man (but) like a devil'. Here it is possible to see Woolagudja articulating associative relations within the cultural system; other members of the culture may express these relationships differently.

An alternative explanation of how the little figures come to be in the rock shelters is that they are painted by sorcerers wishing to kill or deform their enemies (Crawford 1972). Sorcerers paint their victims in the cave and the ancestral heroes who are also painted there use their power to kill the victim. Since, as Sam Woolagudja explained, the evil person can be said to be Lulunja, the two explanations for the source of the paintings are not completely inconsistent. There is a parallel with the apparent contradiction between statements that the ancestors put up their own paintings and the occasional acknowledgement that specified Aboriginal people painted them: participants in ritual often feel themselves to be one with the ancestors whose adventures they are re-enacting (compare Blundell 1982: 16). The sorcerer is performing within the tradition of that part of Kimberley culture antithetical to the values of the Wandjina when he paints a new figure.

Hence the style and content of these two rock art traditions express two basic themes in Worora and Ngarinyin culture: they might be summed up as order and disorder, a structure visibly expressed in the style and composition of figures in decorated shelters.

Among the paintings identified today as capricious spirits are some in an earlier, more elegant style known as Bradshaw figures. These often depict humans in groups, engaged in activities such as dancing (Crawford 1968; 1977). Similar figures represent an important part of the rock art in the Oenpelli-Kakadu region of the Northern Territory, where they are known by the local Aboriginal term, as Mimi. Although in this region, Mimi-like figures are still painted, especially on barks (see Carroll 1977: 123), the evidence of superpositioning suggests that, as a general class 'Mimi' figures have been painted for far longer than recent animal silhouettes in the well-known 'X-Ray' style (Brandl 1977: 266). Chalupka has argued that because old Mimi figures (unlike 'X-Ray' motifs) tend to be associated with inland, and not coastal animals, the origin of the tradition pre-dates the rising sea of the post-glacial period (see Flood 1983: 131–4). Both Brandl (1973: 165) and Chalupka (1977: 245) record that
some men identified all old paintings as the work of Mimi. Brandl heard the 'X-Ray' style described as 'our way of painting', and contrasted with Mimi figures. Yet these texts from an extinct culture have been incorporated, and interpreted within the contemporary one. The Mimi are capricious spirits, whom one must be careful not to antagonise: they live within the rock. In a similar fashion, the Bradshaw figures of the Kimberleys are now construed as the work of the capricious figures of the bush. There is, however, no reason to assume this is what they originally represented. The paintings may well have outlived their original cultural milieu.

A comparison with San (Bushman) rock art of the Drakensberg Mountains

Recent Aboriginal rock art is often rich in associative relationships. On the syntagmatic axis, too, it is rich in one sense: a wide vocabulary of animal species is depicted; together with a more limited range of plants and artefacts. Its structure is poorest in the matter of composition: there is little development of a 'visual grammar'. Recent Aboriginal rock art resembles Palaeolithic cave art in 'the static nature of figurative items, and their apparently hieratic distribution' (Rosenfeld 1982: 302). One must be careful here not to suggest this is an invariant feature of recent Aboriginal art; in the mobile art exemplified by Yirrkala bark paintings and Papunya acrylics, more complex compositions are found which are to a greater extent visual complements to the narrative structure of myth. Neither is entirely a post-contact phenomenon: Morphy shows that bark paintings existed at Yirrkala during the earliest period of White contact (Morphy 1977: 217–24) and the Papunya paintings derive partly from traditional, ceremonial sand paintings (Bardon 1979: 12). Nor is modern Aboriginal culture disinterested in individual behaviour. Many Aboriginal legends use animal behaviour as a source of images of social customs, explaining the origin of initiation, marriage and funeral rites. One of the legends of the Uluru (Ayers Rock) area describes the Brush-tail Possum hero clinging to two girls with a love song, in the way that the possum curls its tail around branches. Another describes the Willy Wagtail woman transgressing ritual law by dancing like a man, in the way the wagtail bird puffs out its chest and swings from side to side. Living Pitjantjatjara incarnate individual ancestral heroes, acquiring their personalities (see also Merlan 1982). But in Aboriginal religion these themes are generally subordinate to the overriding concern with corporate totemic identity.

It therefore seems likely that the absence of complex compositions in recent Aboriginal rock art is not the consequence of lack of skill on the artists' part, but an inherent feature of the art's particular cultural role. This function seems to derive from the exploitation of the opportunity offered by the rock shelters' static, geographical location. The production of paintings operates in a simple presence/absence fashion: 'this is the estate of clan (A) and here are its totems/designs'. This is clearly related to the cognitive structure of clan totemism: social groups are internally undifferentiated, and each associated both with a particular natural species and an estate or tract of land.
The Bradshaw-Mimi tradition, on the other hand, appears to exhibit a concern with interpersonal relationships; with the activities of individual hunters, with the interaction of people in fighting or dance. In this respect it resembles the San (Bushman) art of the Drakensberg, studied by Vinnicombe (1976) and Lewis-Williams (1981).

In contrast to Australian Aboriginal society, Bushman social structure is not based on totemic clans. Bushman culture does draw analogies between the animal and human realms, but it does so in different ways. According to Barnard (1980: 34), Nharo show greatest interest in the two general classes, game animals and hunting animals. Most species of antelope are said to live in bands, like Bushman groups. Some predatory species hunt in pairs like Nharo men, and the sexes may 'exhibit a relatively strong pair bond'. Some carnivores share care of the young between both sexes (35). The emphasis is on animals as exemplars of interpersonal roles.

In a totemic tradition like that of the Western Kimberleys one tends to find individual shelters containing a preponderance of representations of a single species, but with the favoured species varying from site to site so that over a region one would anticipate many species appearing with relatively equal frequency. Vinnicombe and Lewis-Williams found, in the Drakensberg Mountains of South Africa, that the rock art of the now vanished Maluti bushmen concentrated throughout the area on a few species, which can be ranked according to their sharply decreasing frequency of occurrence. The eland far outnumbered other species. Given the absence of species such as wildebeest which were equally familiar to the artists and hunted by them, Vinnicombe and Lewis-Williams both conclude that the art represented not a record of hunting but what, in the terms used here, are associative relationships characteristic of Bushman culture, between Eland and Human (Vinnicombe 1976: 151, 164; Lewis-William 1981: 20). Lewis-Williams details the many contexts in which San draw parallels between human and eland behaviour and reproduces paintings of eland-headed humans, a technique of representation he terms 'confabulation'. Lewis-Williams argues that confabulation, in which elements of different models are combined in a single motif, is indicative of a perceived analogy between man and animal reflecting a theme in Maluti cognition (Lewis-Williams 1981: 22, 65). It is perhaps equally significant that decorated shelters in the Drakensberg are clustered intermittently in a pattern suggestive of an association with social groups assembling for ceremonies (Vinnicombe 1976: 137–9). Both Vinnicombe and Lewis-Williams convincingly link the pre-eminence of the eland in the art with its pre-eminence in the legends recorded, during the last century, from one Maluti survivor. Both draw attention to aspects of eland behaviour which make it an appropriate image of social interaction. Vinnicombe suggests that as a herd animal which aggregated in the wet season, with demonstrably different behaviour patterns between males, females and young, eland herd structure was perceived to reflect the internal structure of Bushman bands (163). Lewis-Williams compiles a comparative documentation of eland imagery in San rites de passage (Girl's Puberty, Boy's first kill, Marriage) and possession dances, among both living and vanished cultures.
In Aboriginal culture each clan has a more or less unique relationship with a specific animal or plant totem, and a more or less exclusive right to certain legendary texts. In Bushman culture each band has the same spiritual relationships with the same set of animal and spirit beings. This may be why the art is apparently free to display a far greater interest in relationships among members interacting within a composition.

According to Lewis-Williams, most of the human figures are depicted in social groups, walking, running, dancing, fighting and hunting. Single human figures are comparatively rare (1981: 19). Vinnicombe tabulates 20 per cent. of human compositions as ‘scenes’ (hunting, dancing, fighting, other) (1981: 163). Many paintings show humans and eland in conjunction. Stylistically Drakensberg paintings resemble the Mimi and Bradshaw figures. Figures are shown in a variety of poses, so that eland appear standing, running, lying or viewed from the rear. Likewise, the human forms of Mimi and Bradshaw art dance, run, throw spears. Many Mimi paintings consist of fighting or hunting scenes. Human representations are remarkable for the poise and movement they depict, suggesting the styles developed to achieve quite different goals in representation to recent Aboriginal art (see Goodnow 1977).

Did the Mimi/Bradshaw tradition spring from an extinct type of Aboriginal culture which lacked clan totemism, or did the emergence of religious systems such as the Wandjina cult simply incorporate rock art into an existing totemic structure? Unfortunately it is impossible to answer this question.

Conclusion

In this article I have confined myself to examining the place of rock art and related myths within a contemporary, or near contemporary cultural context. It is argued that the structure of human cultures is such as to generate an open-ended series of ‘performances’ embodied in particular works of art and particular narrations of myth. Each individual performance is the distinctive product of the artist, or narrator who uses the structure of his culture to construct that performance. It is argued that the structure of the cultural system inferred to underlie the southern San rock art of the Drakensberg facilitates more diverse and internally complex compositions than does the system underlying the totemic rock art of the Kimberleys in Western Australia. To appreciate the complexity of this religious tradition it is necessary to examine the related myths, the narration of which reveals a richer structure. The form of myth and rock art differ due to the complementary functions they perform within the totemic tradition. The dominant theme of the rock art is representation of clans’ totemic emblems. Taking advantage of the fixed and durable location offered by rock shelters, rock paintings act either singly as signals or markers of totemic allegiance and the ownership of estates, or else represent the counterpoised theme of antisocial behaviour.
This article incorporates material from an earlier paper presented at the 1977 ANZAAS Conference in Melbourne, and a Munro Lecture delivered at Edinburgh University in March 1984. Fieldwork in the Western Kimberleys was carried out in July 1975 and May–June 1977 while I was employed by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. On the first expedition I was a member of a team organised by the Western Australian Museum; on the second research was carried out jointly with Valda Blundell of Carleton University, Ottawa. Papers written by Dr Blundell resulting in part from this research are cited in the text.

1 Lewis-Williams also criticized use of a linguistic model in the analysis of art but his objection, readily accepted, is that words and pictures have a different type of connexion with the mental constructs they represent, based on the type and degree of motivation (Lewis-Williams 1981: 3–6).

2 It may therefore be argued that, in a more limited and culturally-specific sense, geometric motifs exhibit one of the properties of a system of numbers. An analogy is drawn by one of the Aboriginal artists from northeast Arnhem Land with whom Morphy worked. Discussing a painting containing silhouette motifs of possums and birds, Narrinin explained that were he representing the subject matter in an exclusive, male context rather than the open camp he would use geometric motifs: ‘this possum, this bird wouldn’t be there, I would just put a number for them’ (Morphy 1977: 244). Of course, what exactly Narrinin intended by describing geometric motifs as ‘numbers’ can only be guessed. Although Mann shows how geometric motifs may be combined as core and adjuncts in a composition (1973: 130–6), nothing resembling mathematical operations can be performed with them.

3 Like Toren I do not believe we should regard symbolism as a residual system called upon when ‘encyclopaedic knowledge’ (Sperber 1975: 93) fails to provide a satisfactory explanation for an event experienced. It cannot be dismissed as received knowledge for as Sperber notes, much scientific knowledge is for us received (101; cf. Horton 1960: 171). The critical point is perhaps Sperber’s comment that when we describe someone as being ‘as cunning as a fox’, ‘a normal encyclopaedic statement is put in quotes and serves no longer to express knowledge about foxes, but something else by means of that knowledge’ (108).

We should not assume that symbolic thought is incompatible with acute observation of natural phenomena. Blurton-Jones and Konner (1976) discovered that the Kala-hari San knew more about the behaviour of animals in their environment than did Western scientists. The difference between the associative structures used by scientific and symbolic thought may be a product of the different use to which they are put: symbolism is used to clarify the behaviour of cultural phenomena, science to clarify the behaviour of natural phenomena. Perhaps this is why symbolic statements ‘co-exist without difficulty with encyclopaedic statements that contradict them’ (64); their appropriateness is tested against different reference points. Although the Dorze believe the leopard is a Christian animal they do not leave goats unattended on fast days (Sperber 1975: 94).

Humphreys has, however, drawn attention to a crucial difference in the way that myth and science can express associative relationships. Science may express relationships in abstract form through mathematics, myth always uses specific images. Hence, ‘mythical thought, in contrast to scientific thought, is characterized by the use of concrete entities rather than abstractions, and by the fact that their relationships are inherent in them and not separable from them, are left implicit and not explicitly stated’ (Humphreys 1978: 269–70). However, where science uses concrete models, it is also subject to the risk of imputing the properties of the model to the phenomena it seeks to explain (as Toren 1983: 266), for instance, points out in her criticism of the computer model of human intelligence.

* Two changes have taken place since Worora, Ngarinyin and some Wunambal were settled at Mowanjum, near Derby. Clan ceremonies including the retouching of paintings are impracticable and they have given way to moiety-based ceremonies influenced by Western Desert cultures to the southwest. Certain Wandjina now characteristic tribal identity, and are depicted in the Mowanjum church. One of these, Walalini, is the ‘Ngarinyin’ Wandjina. Despite the central place this legend occupies in Ngarinyin traditions (see text of paper), it is impossible to recover the exact form this legend might have taken prior to contact (see Blundell 1982: 7). Worora and Ngarinyin are conscious of the parallel between their legend and the Biblical story of Noah, but insist that their tradition is an independent one.

3 This interpretation of the relative age of Mimi figures is contrary to the chronology proposed by
Maynard (1979) who interprets all 'complex figurative' art in Aboriginal Australia as the product of the most recent of three phases of rock art.

REFERENCES


