

Culture



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Volume 2, Number 1, 1982

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1077886ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077886ar>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASA),
formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne
d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Blundell, V. (1982). Symbolic Systems and Cultural Continuity in Northwest Australia: A Consideration of Aboriginal Cave Art. *Culture*, 2(1), 3–20.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1077886ar>

Article abstract

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Symbolic Systems and Cultural Continuity in Northwest Australia: A Consideration of Aboriginal Cave Art

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Archaeological research in Australia suggests that Aboriginal foragers have successfully occupied the continent for many thousands of years. Furthermore, it appears that the trans-generational continuity of their cultural systems has been achieved in the face of a great deal of flux in the daily lives of individuals. This paper argues that Aboriginal cave art constitutes a set of symbols which have facilitated cultural continuity in the face of empirical variability.

La recherche archéologique effectuée en Australie donne lieu de croire que les chasseurs-cueilleurs aborigènes sont parvenus à occuper ce continent depuis plusieurs milliers d'années. Il semble, d'ailleurs, qu'ils aient réussi à assurer la continuité de leurs systèmes culturels d'une génération à l'autre malgré des fluctuations considérables dans la vie quotidienne des individus. Les arguments présentés dans cet article tendent à démontrer que l'art pariétal aborigène constitue un ensemble de symboles qui a favorisé la continuité culturelle face à la variabilité empirique.

Introduction

Since first seen by Europeans in the Nineteenth Century, Australia's "Wandjina type" cave paintings have captured the imaginations of both laypeople and anthropologists¹. These paintings are found in the mountainous part of Northwest Australia known as the West Kimberleys. Located adjacent to the Indian Ocean, this is a land of varied environments. Grassy plains give way to rugged ranges where steep gorges have been cut by tidal rivers. Along the coast there are sandy beaches, mangrove swamps and extensive reefs, while scores of islands can be seen on the horizon. A warm, dry season alternates with a hot, wet season during which rainfall may exceed fifty inches. The area's traditional hunter-gatherers have exploited a wide range of animals and plants with the aid of a limited technology including fire-hardened digging and fishing sticks, atlatl-propelled spears with stone points, and simple stone knives and scrapers.

The cave paintings consist of human-like heads and sometimes the full-length figures of beings that local Aborigines call *Wandjina* (Fig. 1). These figures are characterized by their horseshoe-shaped head-dresses and frequently by very large eyes. When depicted, the bodies of the figures are decorated with linear markings. To many viewers, the most distinctive feature of the *Wandjina* is their lack of a mouth.

Occurring singly or in groups, the *Wandjina* extend across the ceiling or walls of the many caves and rock shelters in the area. Such painted sites can be found every few miles, and it is clear that there are hundreds of such sites (see Crawford, 1968: 18). The *Wandjina* paintings are usually accompanied by those of animals and plants, such as the painting of a fresh water turtle illustrated in Figure 2. Many species are represented, including dingoes, marsupials, birds, reptiles, and honey bees. The paintings are produced with pigments made of powdered red and yellow ochre, white clay and black charcoal, generally mixed with saliva. Kangaroo fat may be added to the mixture or applied as a base to the rock surface. Aborigines use the palms of their hands, their fingers and crude brushes made by chewing the ends of twigs in applying the pigments. Or they may mix clay and water in their mouth and blow the mixture onto the rock surface.

As the subject of a large literature, these *Wandjina* paintings have generated a diversity of interpretations. Early views saw the *Wandjina* figures as representations of foreign visitors to the Kimberley coast; candidates included the Japanese, Eleventh Century Moors and Southeast Asian fishermen (see Crawford, 1968: 66-67). More recently, they have been interpreted as portraits of extraterrestrial "astronauts" thought to have visited the planet Earth (von Daniken, 1970: Fig. 33). However, despite such claims of foreign —indeed extraterrestrial!— influence, anthropologists working in the West Kimberleys have demonstrated that the *Wandjina* paintings do not incorporate exotic or foreign elements that would necessitate some outside influence (Elkin, 1930). Instead, anthropological analyses of the paintings have focused upon their meaning to the traditional Aboriginal peoples who execute them. Central to these analyses has been the interpretation of the paintings as visual representations of beings that are orally presented in the complex myths of the local Aborigines (e.g. Love, 1930; Elkin, 1930; Crawford, 1968). While this is a significant perspective, I believe that the painted figures also have a profound symbolic meaning as art forms (*cf.* Layton, 1977: 2). What I intend to argue in this paper is that Aboriginal foragers, like members of all human societies, attempt to maintain the transgenerational continuity of their cultural systems. However, this is difficult because their individual experiences are highly variable and their lives are characterized by many changing conditions. As theorists such as Abner Cohen (1974) and Victor Turner (1975) have argued, one way in which humans maintain the continuity of their cultural systems is by encoding cultural information in symbols, symbols that can be reinterpreted in the context of changing circumstances. I will suggest that

the painted figures found in the caves of Northwest Australia are visually presented symbols whose meanings can be analyzed independently of the meanings of myth symbols. Because they have a concreteness of form and, as we shall see, are located at fixed points in space, the cave art symbols effectively communicate cultural "models". Furthermore, their meanings can change without alteration of their general form, providing an "illusion" of changelessness. Before presenting this analysis, it is necessary to provide background data on the West Kimberley Aborigines and to consider some of the conditions that have characterized their hunting and gathering way of life.

Background

The *Wandjina* paintings are executed by the Worora, Ngarinjin and Wunambal, three linguistically related and inter-marrying groups which share basic features of economy, social and territorial organization, cosmology and mythology.² These groups have generally been referred to as "tribes" by anthropologists who have worked in the area.

Historical Context: The historical record of contact between Europeans and members of these groups begins in 1827 when the first of several European parties explored the area.³ These expeditions appear to have had little effect upon local Aborigines, and the only form of contact that is recorded involved occasional hostilities between parties of Aborigines and the Europeans. However, in their reports these explorers portrayed the Kimberley environment in glowing prose and thus brought the area to the attention of potential Euro-Australian settlers. Thus in 1864, eighty-four settlers landed at Camden Harbour in Worora country, but they found the rugged terrain, the heat and the monsoonal rains unbearable and abandoned the settlement the following year (see Blundell, 1975: 46-47). These Camden Sound settlers were the first Europeans to have an opportunity for sustained contact with West Kimberley Aborigines, but any details of such interactions have, to my knowledge, gone unrecorded. However, the missionary-anthropologist J.R. Love reports that when he lived among the West Kimberley Aborigines in the 1900's (see below), older men told him that the Camden residents had shot a large number of their fellow tribesmen (Love, 1936: xi). A further attempt was made in 1892 to establish a station in the area, but it too proved unsuccessful (Bradshaw, 1892).

Instead, Euro-Australian settlers turned their attention to the southern edge of West Kimberley, outside the traditional lands of the Worora and Wunambal, but within the easternmost territory of the Ngarinjin. Sheep and cattle stations were esta-

blished in the 1880's along the Fitzroy, Meda and Lennard Rivers and the town of Derby was founded. In Ngarinjin country several cattle stations were established in the early decades of the 1900's, including Sale River Station (before 1931) and Gibb River Station. These stations remained quite isolated until the early 1970's when a graded gravel road was constructed between Derby and Gibb River Station. Some of the West Kimberley Aborigines drifted to these stations where they found temporary jobs as labourers. But they also spent time in the bush following their more traditional way of life. By the late 1930's they were making their spear points of glass that they obtained from Europeans or found at abandoned stations (Lommel, 1952: 2). The German anthropologist Andreas Lommel did fieldwork in this area in 1938-39 during which he visited painted *Wandjina* sites and travelled north with Aborigines into the area of the upper Glenelg River where he camped with members of the Worora, Ngarinjin and Wunambal tribes (Lommel, 1952: 61-62). Lommel's monograph (1952) provides important ethnographic data on the Wunambal as well as the Worora and Ngarinjin. In the settled area of the West Kimberleys relations between Europeans and Aborigines were not good. Aborigines were commonly sought by police parties because they speared cattle, and their practice of burning the grass in the dry season to facilitate their hunting also played havoc with the pasturage (Carter, 1971: 41). Just how many Aborigines were incarcerated or killed by the police is not known, but it seems likely that many were (see Haydon, 1911 and Idriess, 1952). Diseases introduced by Europeans took their toll of Aborigines; an influenza epidemic in the Kimberleys in the early 1940's caused many deaths (McKenzie, 1969: 172). A number of tribes that were linguistically related to the Worora, Ngarinjin and Wunambal became extinct (Blundell, 1975: Ch. III).

However, two events were to facilitate the persistence to the present day of many of the Worora, Ngarinjin and Wunambal as a traditionally oriented and culturally distinct population. These events were the founding in 1912 of a Presbyterian Mission at Hanover Bay in Worora territory and the establishment between 1917 and 1925 of a government station reserve for Aborigines at Munja on Walcott Inlet in Ngarinjin territory.⁴ The Presbyterian Mission came to be known as Kunmunya and a history of the mission is provided by McKenzie (1969). When the mission was founded, members of the Worora and western-most Ngarinjin tribes as well as some Wunambal began to visit it and camp there for increasingly longer periods of time.⁵ In 1914, the young missionary J.R. Love spent six months at Kunmunya, and he returned to head the mission from 1927 to 1940. During this time, Love collected a

variety of ethnographic data (Love, 1930, 1935, 1936). Much of traditional life persisted during the early years of Kunmunya, and Love encouraged the Aborigines to pursue their economic activities in the bush, although he did attempt to initiate changes in behaviour that was offensive to European values (e.g., the marriage of young girls to old men and female infanticide). The Aborigines who increasingly centered their activities at Munja were members of the Ngarinjin and Wunambal tribes. These people also continued traditional bush life according to the Australian anthropologist A.P. Elkin, who worked at Munja in 1927-1928, and the German anthropologist Helmut Petri, who worked there and at Sale River Station in 1938 (Elkin, 1930; Petri, 1954). However, as with the Aborigines who had been drawn into station life, there was a decline of the Kunmunya and Munja based populations, so that by 1951 there were fewer than two hundred Aborigines associated with these establishments. Despite forays into the bush, these Aborigines had become increasingly settled at Munja and Kunmunya and, it would seem, more dependent upon Europeans for goods and medical services (see McKenzie, 1969). In the 1950's, the two populations joined together and moved south to a spot near the town of Derby where the newly constructed Mowanjum Mission became their permanent home and where their population has increased (Mowanjum is now an incorporated community; see Freeman, 1974 for details). Although Mowanjum is outside the traditional territory of the Worora, Wunambal and Ngarinjin, a cattle station has been maintained further north in their lands, and Aborigines take whatever opportunities that are available for trips into the bush. For example, in 1977 the anthropologist Robert Layton and I visited a group of thirteen adults who had been camped for several weeks in Ngarinjin territory west of Gibb River Station where they were living entirely off the land.⁶

There is, then, continuity between the earliest Aboriginal visitors to Kunmunya and Munja and the population now living at Mowanjum, and Aborigines living at stations in the West Kimberleys maintain links with relatives at Mowanjum. For example, older Mowanjum residents who were born at Kunmunya can recognize deceased individuals in photographs taken in the 1920's and 1930's by Love. I have been able to compile records of births, deaths, group affiliations and marriages for many individuals born within the past one hundred years (Blundell and Layton, 1978; Blundell, 1980). The presence of Munja and, especially, Kunmunya aided the persistence of a community of biologically and culturally related people. Over the decades and with the movement of this community to Mowanjum, major changes have taken place in a number of aspects of

life, particularly in economic life, settlement patterns and material culture. But for the older people, who were my informants in 1972 and 1976-77, as well as the informants of Lucich (1968), Layton (1976, 1977; Blundell and Layton, 1978) and Crawford (1968), there has been a great deal of persistence of features of social organization, cosmology and mythology. The clan and moiety structures of these people have remained integral parts of their social life, and they continue to express much of their behaviour in the context of a binary model called the *wunan*, to be described below.

Social and Territorial Organization: West Kimberley Aborigines belong to exogamous patrilineal clans which are grouped into exogamous, inter-tribal moieties. Clans are totemically associated with discrete and named areas of land referred to as "estates" by Australian anthropologists. Kinship terminology reflects an emphasis upon clan solidarity and the importance of the clan and clan estate. In some cases, an individual will classify all the men of another clan under one kin term and all the women in that clan under another term, regardless of generation level. This, for example, is the case for a man with regard to the clan of his Mother's Brother, and he refers to the clan estate of this clan as his "Mother's Brother" (see Elkin, 1932 and Lucich, 1968 for details). At her birth (and sometimes prior to it) a father promises his daughter in marriage to a man in another specified clan in the opposite moiety. Such bestowals can be analyzed at both the levels of clan and moiety exchanges (see Blundell and Layton, 1978). The preferred marriage partner for a male is a woman from the clan of his own Father's Mother. Two men cannot exchange sisters, nor can a man marry a woman from the clan of his own mother. The resulting marriage system is an asymmetrical one involving indirect exchanges among clans but direct exchanges between the moieties. Ideally, each clan bestows women in marriage to two other clans and receives women from two additional clans, in alternate generations, so that the affinal links of clansmen are the same in alternate generations. Out of eighty-nine instances of such bestowals that are known to have occurred between about 1880 and 1932, seventy or 79% have conformed to the normative pattern (Blundell and Layton, 1978: Table 2).

The male members of a clan constitute the core members of a group that includes in-married wives and is usually called the "band" or the "horde" in the anthropological literature. Elsewhere I have suggested that these Kimberley bands are best conceived of as cultural constructs held in the minds of the Aborigines (Blundell, 1980). Individuals recognize that they are members of a particular band that is

named after the clan of the core members; but at the same time, their own residential behaviour has been flexible as groups have broken apart or come together for economic and ceremonial activities and, recently, as people have become sedentary at Mowanjum (*cf.* Love, 1936: 93, 224 and Freeman, 1974: 19). I have also suggested elsewhere that members of the West Kimberley bands traditionally exploited the resources in the clan estates of their core members, but that these estates did not always provide sufficient resources and/or permit sufficient mobility for occupation in these estates throughout the year (Blundell, 1975, 1980; Blundell and Layton, 1978). For example, older informants have told me that their inland estates become flooded during the wet season, making foraging in them difficult. In the dry season, fresh water is scarce and vegetable foods (especially roots) are difficult to locate. Band members were therefore able, by invitation, to pursue economic activities in the estates of clans where close relatives were living (*cf.* Petri, 1954: 17). Thus links established through marriage were especially important in providing band members with alternative resource areas. Inland clansmen, for example, frequently obtained wives from clans with coastal estates where fishing could be undertaken in the wet season.

Social and territorial organization can be further understood with reference to an Aboriginal, emic model called the *wunan*. This model is shared by the Worora, Ngarinjin and Wunambal as well as other groups throughout Northwest Australia. The *wunan* is described in three recent papers and therefore only a brief summary is provided here (Blundell and Layton, 1978; Blundell, 1980; Layton, 1977). One aspect of this model is the idea that the West Kimberley clans are ordered relative to one another. The relative order of the clans is seen in the geographical location of their estates. For example, the three estates of the Ngarinjin-speaking *Barurungari*, *Wadjawadjangari* and *Aridjirarija* clans are located adjacent to one another, with the *Barurungari Wandjina* estate to the east, the *Aridjirarija* estate to the west and the *Wadjawadjangari* estate in between. In this example, the *Barurungari* are said to be the "top" clan, the *Wadjawadjangari* the "middle" clan and the *Aridjirarija* the "bottom" clan.⁷ These three clans belong to the same moiety (*Wodoj*). In fact, the mapping of the estates of additional clans indicates that estates of clans in each of the inter-tribal moieties tend to be geographically adjacent, so that long, snake-like areas of territory are formed (see Blundell, 1980: Fig. 3). Informants perceive of these curving areas of land as the two segments or "channels" of the *wunan*, and they designate each segment by name: the *Djungun* moiety country is called *Monadba*; the *Wodoj* moiety country is *Mamaladba*. Thus, other

estates, such as those of the Worora-speaking *Djilarnbaja* clan and *Larinuwaja* clan, which are located to the southwest of the estates of the above Ngarinjin clans, are said to be “further down the *wunan*”. Clans that are in the same moiety are said to “share the *wunan*” and clans with adjacent estates were generally closely related consanguineally (see Blundell and Layton, 1978). A number of responsibilities are seen to “follow the *wunan*” in the sense that they will be passed to members in one’s own moiety if no one in one’s clan can fulfill them. Today at Mowanjum, for example, a clansman who cannot accommodate a visitor will pass the responsibility “down the *wunan*” to a same-moiety clansman.

A second aspect of the *wunan* is the idea that clans are interrelated by exchange and that there is an order to such exchanges. Thus the direction of exchanges of trade or sacred items is analogous to the spatial location of clan estates in *Mamaladba* and *Monadba*, whether the male members of clans are living in their own estate, camped together for communal economic or ceremonial activities, or living together at Mowanjum. According to informants, these goods “go by *wunan*” as they are passed from

“top” to “bottom” clansmen and vice versa. Today, for example, goods are sent to Mowanjum from Aborigines living at Kalumburu Mission in the northern part of Northwest Australia. At Mowanjum, the items are passed along and between the two *wunan* segments from “top” clans such as the *Barurungari* to “bottom” clans such as the *Larinuwaja*, who in turn pass the goods on to clans living south and east of Mowanjum who are “further down the *wunan*”. To Aborigines, the *wunan* is “like a map”. This depiction refers both to the organization of estates in space and to the order of social interrelations. One informant told me: “Our people can not live without the *wunan* because it holds every man in his place”⁸.

A third aspect of the *wunan* is the idea that the clans are associated with certain plant and animal species, so that the ordering of humans is extended to nature. This aspect of Aboriginal thought will be considered in more detail below.

Cosmology: Kimberley Aborigines believe that the *wunan* was formed during the Dreamtime, which Worona call *Lalai* (*Lalan* or *Ungur* in Ngarinjin; *Urzeit* in Wunambal). As elsewhere in Aboriginal



Figure 1. *Wandjina* and Snake Paintings in Cave in Ngarinjin Territory in Northwest Australia.

Australia, the Dreamtime is the focus of cosmology. Lommel has noted for the Kimberleys that Aborigines live only in two eras, the ancient Dreamtime, when life began, and a present time (Lommel, 1952: 7). The future “hardly plays a part in their thinking” (Lommel, 1952: 7). During the Dreamtime, both the natural and human world are believed to have been formed coterminously by powers which still populate the world, although they are less visible. As Maddock states, the Dreamtime is a theory of the definition of space and time, not a theory of creation out of nothing: “The earth and life are conceived to have been already in existence when the powers began their work” (Maddock, 1974: 109). For Aborigines there is neither a past nor history in the Western sense. Instead, Aboriginal “history” is non-linear in the sense that all aspects of the present are believed to have been set down during the Dreamtime so that the present constitutes a re-enactment of these Dreamtime events. Such a view, as we shall see below, affirms continuity and denies change (cf. Tonkinson, 1974: 71 and Jensen, 1963: 118).

One of the major ways that the nature of humans and the world is revealed is through myths (cf.

Burridge, 1973: 82). Thus major myth segments in the Kimberleys relate the formation during the Dreamtime of society, including social groups, social rules and social order, as well as the structuring of nature, including the shaping of the landscape. One important myth related to me in 1976 by a Worora informant tells how a Dreamtime being named *Djanba* created sacred emblems that are now carved on boards. These emblems were stolen from *Djanba*'s blind mother by a hunter who gave them to people. Among the recipients were *Wodoj* and *Djungun*, who are both mythological figures and the “first men”. They fought over the sacred emblems but then agreed to cease their hostilities and to found and lead two great “tribes” which are the West Kimberley moieties. They also agreed to exchange their daughters in marriage as well as to pass the sacred emblems among and between the members of their “tribes”. Order thus replaced chaos and reciprocity replaced antagonism. *Djungun* and *Wodoj* are said to have originated the *wunan* in this way and to have agreed to maintain the *wunan* through continued exchanges.⁹

In addition to these moiety culture heroes, two



Figure 2. Turtle Painting in Cave in Ngarinjin Territory in Northwest Australia.

spiritual forces called *Ungud* and *Walanganda* are important in Kimberley cosmology. *Ungud* is generally portrayed in myth (and in the rock art) as a snake which was present at the beginning of the Dreamtime when the world was only a great salt water. According to one myth collected by Petri in 1938-39, *Ungud*:

lifted himself straight up, took his boomerang and threw it across the world sea. The boomerang made a big curve and touched the water at various times. Wherever it touched the water, a big wave came up and flat, even land appeared. (Petri, 1954: 62)

Walanganda is a creative force whose image is found in the Milky Way, and who is frequently reported as being pre-eminent over the other Dreamtime beings.¹⁰ However, it is the *Wandjina* that dominate Aboriginal discussions of their cosmology and figure most prominently in their myths. Their cosmological position is nicely summarized by Jensen (1963: 116-126, 149),¹¹ and additional discussions are provided by Love (1930, 1936), Elkin (1930), Lommel (1952, 1967), Petri (1954), Crawford (1968), Layton (1976, 1977), Blundell (1974) and Blundell and Layton (1978). There are different Aboriginal accounts of the origin of *Wandjina*. According to the informants of Petri, the first *Wandjina* were created by *Ungud*. After *Ungud* brought forth the land, he wandered across it and laid many eggs. It was from these eggs that the many *Wandjina* appeared (Petri, 1954: 62). According to Lommel's informants, *Ungud* found the first *Wandjina* in a dream at the bottom of water (Lommel, 1952: 12-13). During the Dreamtime the *Wandjina* then spread over the earth and their travels about the West Kimberleys are recounted in scores of myths. While it was *Ungud* who created a flat, formless land from the world-sea, it was the *Wandjina* who gave shape to the country by creating rivers, mountains and other geographical features. They also invented important artifacts and social customs. One of their most significant acts was to make rain. Lommel's informants told him that the *Wandjina* did this by blowing rain over the land *with their mouths*—mouths that they have now lost (Lommel, 1952: 14). In some myths the *Wandjina* are anthropomorphic beings, including both males and females. In other myths they appear in theriomorphic form; for example, the lizard *yadara* is said by my informants to be the *Wandjina Yadara*. Or the *Wandjina* are credited with the creation of animal and plant species. In this way, individual and named *Wandjina* are mythically associated with certain natural species which are thought of as the "Fathers" and "Brothers" of the *Wandjina* (Lommel, 1952: 14).

During the Dreamtime each *Wandjina* also became linked to a group of humans who today constitute the West Kimberley clans. Myths relate how

named *Wandjina* created major geographical features in specific clan estates. In some clan estates the *Wandjina* was accompanied by other *Wandjina* who are said to be his "followers". After completing these Dreamtime exploits, the *Wandjina* went into the earth at a rock shelter in this estate (while the rock was still soft) leaving its "imprint" as a painting. The cave paintings are thus said by Aborigines to be the "shadows" of both the *Wandjina* and the natural species that are associated with them. The land around the rock shelter where the *Wandjina* "finished" its wanderings and left its shadow became the estate of the *Wandjina*'s associated clan. Furthermore, the activities of the *Wandjina* did not entirely cease with their localization at these painted sites, although the *Wandjina* are no longer present "in any corporeal form" (Jensen, 1963: 120). Instead, the *Wandjina* constitute a continuing spiritual force in contemporary life. The spiritual essence of each *Wandjina* is localized at the rock shelter where the *Wandjina* "left its picture", and at nearby waterholes where the *Wandjina*, along with *Ungud*, create "soul germs" of children (Lommel, 1952: 28, 39). The soul germ, called the *jajaru*, is one of several "souls" that every person has, and it "becomes the most important component of the new human being during his life span, his true life substance, and returns at death to the place of its origin" (Jensen, 1963: 122). Men are said to find the *jajaru* soul germs of their children in a waterhole in a dream and to pass them in a dream to their wives who then become pregnant. Since these soul germs are almost always found in the waterhole in a man's own clan estate, the members of a clan can be viewed as a particular *Wandjina*'s descendants (Lommel, 1967: 280 and 1952: 26-30; but see Lommel, 1952: 31 for exceptions). Not only are the *Wandjina* the source of these human souls, but as we shall see below they are the source of life-giving rains.

Like the whole of nature, each *Wandjina* belongs to one of the great inter-tribal Kimberley moieties which, as we have seen, were begun by *Djungun* and *Wodoj*. While these culture heroes formed the *wunan* and gave it its basic binary structure, it was the *Wandjina* who founded the clans and gave the *wunan* more precise form by specifying the social order of the clans and the geographical locations of the clan estates. Jensen, for example, stresses these "order-creating labors" of the *Wandjina* (1963: 120). With the Dreamtime localization of the *Wandjina* at the painted sites and the corresponding localization of the clans in their estates, the Kimberley myths turn to the idea of orderly exchange. An informant with whom Layton and I worked in 1977 provided a myth that relates how the *Wandjina*, once localized, initiated the exchanges that characterize the *wunan*. As Layton writes:

According to Collier Benmorrow, a Wunambal man, the long-neck freshwater turtle and the "Bicycle Lizard" carried objects from one Wandjina to the next: 'That Wandjina wan't go walkabout; he belong in one place'. The first Wandjina in the chain of connections established by exchange gave the lizard cockatoo feathers, ochre, spears and sacred boomerangs. The lizard carried them for a short period. (Layton, 1977: 6)

Layton has recently argued that the texts of the West Kimberley myths serve to organize Aboriginal experiences through the "creation of social order" and the "creation of Lévi-Straussian categories in the natural world which constitute analogies of the social order" (Layton, 1977: 8; see also Blundell and Layton, 1978). As expressions of cosmology, these myths also communicate to Aborigines the significance of the events of the Dreamtime and their relationship to contemporary life. As Petri notes, it was during the Dreamtime that "everything became as it is today" and "Anything that comes after [the Dreamtime] remains the unchanged result of this epoch, its eternally uniform repetition" (Petri, 1954, translated and cited in Jensen, 1963: 118). Therefore, no human could ever improve or perfect the world as it was laid down in the Dreamtime. Thus the concept of change or evolution is quite alien to West Kimberley Aborigines. This conceptual commitment to changelessness is the most fundamental feature of West Kimberley cosmology. This, then, brings us to the question of whether Aboriginal life is, as they believe, static. And if their life is not static, how do the Aborigines deal with change?

Continuity and Change Among West Kimberley Aborigines

As anthropologists we seem to hold two views of foragers like those that live in Northwest Australia. One view is supported by archaeological data which show that such adaptations have been amazingly persistent in time. Indeed, it appears that hominids have lived in small-scale hunting and gathering societies for literally millions of years! Thus our textbooks frequently portray foraging societies as highly stable and characterized by only the slowest of change (e.g., Wenke, 1980: 342). This has been one view of Australian Aborigines, whose prehistoric remains indicate a long period of occupation of the continent with little modification of basic features of their technology or economy.¹²

A second view of foragers suggests that there are a number of ways in which they experience changing conditions and that these experiences might well undermine continuity of their cultural systems by encouraging changes in the ways they view and organize their world. For example, it is well documented

that the resources upon which foragers depend are differentially distributed in space and time, so that changes occur in their availability and abundance. Individuals move about the land and alter their membership in residential groups in response to such environmental fluctuations (Lee and DeVore, eds., 1968). For example, in the West Kimberleys many behavioural norms are phrased in terms of clan affiliation, such as the norm that male members of a clan live together in their clan estate. However, prolonged dry periods or extended heavy rains would have meant that clansmen had to spend long periods outside their estates. Even when environmental conditions were optimal it is likely that clansmen "visited" several nearby estates in the course of their annual economic activities (see Blundell, 1980 and Blundell and Layton, 1978).

Demographic variability is also common among foragers. Because such societies constitute small populations, even minor variations in fertility, in mortality and in sex ratios at birth will affect the survival chances of individual families, lines and social groups, such as the Kimberley clans and bands. Using computer simulation, Wobst (1974) and McArthur (1976) have demonstrated this vulnerability of small populations to minor demographic variability. In her comprehensive monograph on the demography of the Dobe !Kung, Nancy Howell notes that "the smaller the population the more likely it is that random fluctuations in the number of births and deaths alone will finish the population" (Howell, 1979: 218). We have seen above that the population of West Kimberley Aborigines declined in the early 1900's. My own research has documented significant changes in the sizes of clans and bands (Blundell, 1980). For example, within the past one hundred years over one-third of the area's clans have become extinct. However, even under the dramatic effects of European contact, the demographic prospects of the Kimberley clans have been quite variable, and not all of the clans have been equally affected by attrition. For example, one clan (*Ganbungari*) that is known to have had at least seventeen male members in 1912 is now extinct while another clan (*Filangari*), also known to have had at least seventeen male members, is flourishing today. A third clan (*Djilambaja*) which is only known to have had three male members in 1912 is also now well populated (see Blundell, 1980: Table 1). I suspect that stable regional population size has been a more common feature of the Kimberley Aborigine's prehistory, and that demographic flux has occurred primarily at the levels of clans and bands (see Peterson 1975, 1979 for discussions of hunter-gatherer population dynamics).

A further form of variability is discussed by Burridge who argues that changes in both the natural

and social environments may result in adjacent generations of foragers having very different kinds of experiences. Burridge writes that in such societies:

Longer and shorter cycles of climatic change; animal population increases, decreases, and movements, and variations in the availability of vegetable resources together with the not so constant activities, ambitions, and desires of neighboring groups—all contributed to one generation's experience being rather different from that preceding and yet, perhaps, not so different from that of two or three generations ago. (Burridge, 1979: 83)

Finally, within the historic period it is clear that there have been dramatic changes in the social environment of West Kimberley Aborigines. Aborigines have adopted many items of European material culture, and their settlement patterns have now been radically altered as they have become more settled on missions and at stations. There have been other changes as well that perhaps can not be so easily or so entirely related to the effects of European contact. For example, Kimberley Aborigines have adopted from other Aboriginal tribes new forms of magical cults, new songs and dances, and new versions of myths (see Lommel, 1952 and Petri, 1954).

To the non-anthropologist, our two views of foragers must seem paradoxical. How can we argue both that foraging societies are relatively unchanging, but at the same time characterized by the kinds of fluctuations that we have been outlining? One way in which many anthropologists have resolved this seeming paradox is by relating these two views to different levels of analysis of foraging societies. The view of conservatism and continuity has been related to what are generally called the structural aspects of cultural systems. In contrast, the view that portrays foragers as characterized by flux has been related to what have been called "empirical", "behavioural" or "organizational" aspects. For example, in Northwest Australia, patrilineal clans are structural features in the cultural system. The fact that these societies have such features has not changed for many generations; however, as we have seen above, given clans do become extinct (*cf.* Anderson, 1979: 36).

Although the above paradox can thus be resolved, I fear that such a resolution obscures an important question about Aboriginal foragers. Given our analytical skills, we anthropologists seem content with the notion of a very changeable, but somehow changeless, society. The amazing thing is that foragers like the Australians also seem quite content with such a notion, for, as we have seen, they view their own society as fundamentally changeless. Indeed, it is not the anthropologist but rather the Aborigine who maintains on a daily basis *and* transmits to the next generation such a model of a

changeless society, *in spite of all the evidence to the contrary*. For in point of fact, Aboriginal life is not static! Therefore, in places like Australia anthropologists document cultural homeostasis because Aboriginal foragers are somehow able to deny the significance of flux and maintain the *fiction* of changelessness. Aborigines believe that the same structural units and organizing principles are appropriate to their individual and varying circumstances. Despite the flux that characterizes their lives, they agree that nothing ever *really* changes. Many anthropologists have argued that it is adaptive—indeed essential—for these societies to have such structural stability and continuity, so that each generation does not have to invent anew its own cultural system. But surely the remarkable fact is that foragers are able to maintain such persistent structures despite rather remarkable variability in the circumstances of individuals and even whole generations. The very interesting question thus arises: How do they maintain this "fiction" of changelessness?

This continuity of structure is all the more remarkable when we consider a further problem that human societies face in transmitting cultural information to the next generation. Palaeo-anthropologists have argued that by about 50,000 years ago the rate of cultural change had exceeded the rate of morphological change, especially changes in cranial capacity and the complexity of hominid brains. After this time, the extent of cultural complexity was such that "it became impossible for any individual within a population to learn the entire body of information that is passed on from generation to generation" (Wolpoff, 1980: 355). If it is the case that members of foraging societies "can learn and utilize only part of the total cultural repertoire" (Wolpoff, 1980: 355), then the transmission to the next generation of cultural systems must be difficult indeed. This is a problem for all societies, but a particularly acute one for non-literate and mobile foragers, given the kinds of flux in their lives. For example, Burridge (1979: 83) suggests that the knowledge available to such people is typically spread over several generations, because, as noted above, adjacent generations may experience very different environmental and social conditions.

Many anthropologists have commented upon the tension that exists in any society because of the need to maintain long-term stability in the face of everyday variability. Berger and Luckman (1967: 121), for example, write that "*all* social reality is precarious. All societies are constructions in the face of chaos". Given these considerations, it is commonly argued that the stability of social structure "does not occur automatically, but must be constantly maintained in the face of individual needs that are contrary to traditional patterns" (Anderson, 1979: 48). Social

systems, like all systems, are viewed as tending “toward chaos unless there is an *input of energy* directed toward maintaining the system” (Anderson, 1979: 36; emphasis mine). In discussing the transgenerational transmission of cultural systems, many anthropological textbooks rightfully stress that culture is learned by succeeding generations rather than genetically transmitted, but they leave the discussion at that (see, for example, Hammond, 1971: 10). However, although it is learned, culture is never *automatically* transmitted. Rather cultural systems must be actively *re-created* by men and women who engage in behaviour that is directed toward this very purpose. What I wish to argue in the remainder of this paper is that this constant “input of energy” required for the transmission of cultural systems involves a reliance upon symbols. Following writers such as Abner Cohen (1974) and Victor Turner (1975), I view symbols as “fundamental for the establishment and continuity of social order” (Cohen, 1974: 38). I wish to consider the *Wandjina* type cave art of Northwest Australian Aborigines and to suggest that this art constitutes a symbolic system which facilitates cultural continuity among these foragers. Because it is based upon symbolism, the cave art is an especially effective means of communicating cultural information. This is because symbols have special charac-

teristics which both facilitate cultural continuity *and* permit the accommodation of individual experiences and perceptions.

The Wandjina Cave Paintings as Symbols

I believe that the various paintings in the Kimberley caves constitute symbols in that they are “objects... that stand *ambiguously* for a multiplicity of disparate meanings, evoke sentiments and emotions, and impel men to action” (Cohen, 1974: Preface). This definition is taken from Cohen, and it is also cited by Firth in his book *Symbols: Public and Private*. Firth, in this book, provides a convenient summary of symbolism:

The essence of symbolism lies in the recognition of one thing as standing for (re-presenting) another, the relation between them normally being that of concrete to abstract, particular to general. The relation is such that the symbol by itself appears capable of generating and receiving effects otherwise reserved for the object to which it refers—and such effects are often of high emotional charge. (Firth, 1973: 15-16)

What, then, are the meanings of these art forms viewed as symbols, what is it that they “re-present”, and what is their role in facilitating cultural continuity, given the realities of empirical variability? I believe that the painted *Wandjina* and species figures have a number of important meanings associated with them.

1. Their least abstract meaning is that they visually re-present activities that took place during the Aboriginal period of creation called the Dreamtime (*cf.* Layton, 1977). As we have seen, these activities are also related in the area’s rich mythology which is orally communicated and also portrayed in song and dance. The *Wandjina* and animal forms travelled about the land during the Dreamtime, giving form to the landscape and to human behaviour. Individually named *Wandjina* and the natural species became linked to groups that today constitute the area’s patrilineal clans. Eventually, the *Wandjina* went into the earth at a cave, where they left their “shadow” on the rocky surface. The land around the cave became the homeland of the *Wandjina*’s associated clan. Northwest Australia became divided into a number of clan estates, each associated with a patrilineal clan, and each containing a major gallery of paintings. Similarly, animals and plants “finished” their Dreamtime travels at the cave sites of the clans with which they became associated.

2. At a more abstract level, the *Wandjina* and species paintings go beyond iconography and beyond their more mnemonic function of reminding people of the area’s mythology. As discussed above, the members of a clan are united by a spiritual bond in



Figure 3. *Wandjina* Painting on Plywood made by Worora Aborigine in 1972.

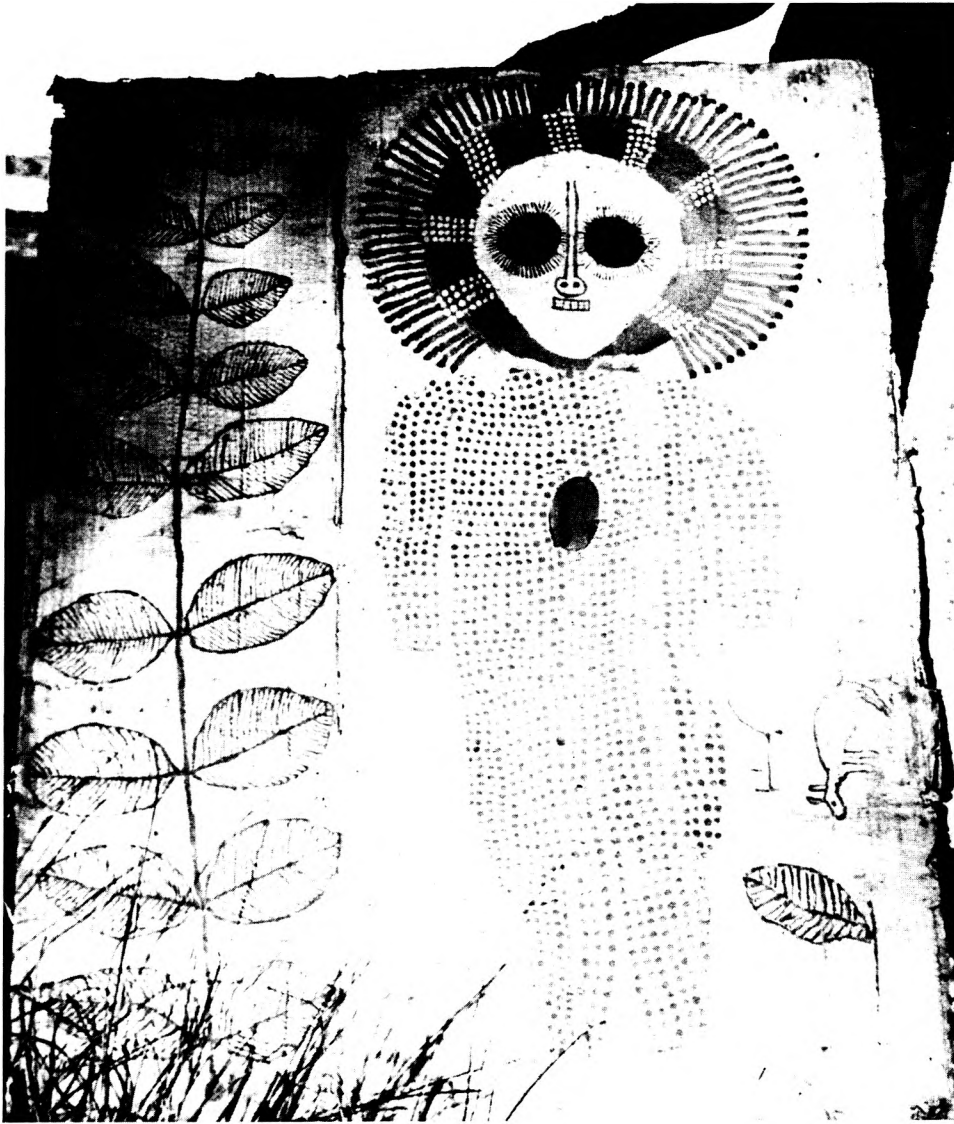


Figure 4. *Wandjina* Painting on Cardboard made by "Immigrant" Aborigine in 1972.

that they have obtained their soul germs from the *Wandjina* that left its picture in their clan estate. As elsewhere in Australia, these patrilineal clans do not form residential groups, nor are clansmen and women restricted to residence in their own clan estate. We have seen that women live in the bands of their husbands after their marriage and that members of bands can forage in estates where they have close consanguineal and affinal relatives. On the rare occasion that a person's soul germ has been found outside the estate of his father, he also has the right to hunt in the estate where the soul germ was found (Lommel, 1952: 31). Members of the Kimberley clans therefore have the problem of maintaining their sense of identity as a clan and their tie to their clan estate. Aborigines believe that when the clans became associated with the *Wandjina* and natural species during the Dreamtime, they entered into reciprocal relationships with these spiritual beings. They believe

that the continuity of the world order will be assured and natural species will continue to reproduce only through the fulfillment of their responsibilities to these beings. While the Aborigines believe that the paintings were "put there" during the Dreamtime, they also believe that humans must maintain the paintings by "retouching" them with charcoal and pigments (cf. Elkin, 1930; Lommel, 1952). By keeping the pictures "fresh" the world will be kept fertile: rain will fall, plants and animals will reproduce and human soul germs will be available in the waterholes. Therefore, just before the rainy season each year the men of a clan must congregate at the major painted gallery in their estate in order to fulfill this responsibility to the *Wandjina* and the species by "freshening" their "shadows". Lommel provides important data on these painting ceremonies. The oldest member of the clan took on the major task of retouching the paintings, saying as he did so:

I am now going to touch myself up and fortify myself, I am going to touch myself, so that there will be rain. (quoted in Lommel, 1952: 14)

After applying the fresh pigments, the old man filled his mouth with water and blew it over the picture because, as Lommel was told, this was the way that the *Wandjina* had blown rain over the land during the Dreamtime. When Lommel and Petri did fieldwork in 1938-39, some of the clans had senior men called *banman* who had extraordinary spiritual powers and who freshened the paintings at the annual ceremonies. If these normal ceremonies failed to bring the annual rains, the *banman* would paint over the *Wandjina* pictures in a rough and careless manner and throw stones at them, uttering powerful chants (Lommel, 1952: 45). The *banman* could also stop excessive rain through special rituals. The *banman* could even make copies of the cave pictures and thereby bring rain to a district, or they could stop excessive rain by "singing" small *Wandjina* pictures to death (Lommel, 1952: 45). The freshening ceremonies have undoubtedly been highly emotional gatherings, and the Aborigines believe that unless the paintings are retouched the powers embodied in them will become dim and the world will be propelled back into chaos. Therefore, a more implicit meaning of the *Wandjina* paintings is that they symbolize the associated clan and the associated clan estate. In a situation where clan members may find themselves widely dispersed at various times of the year, the painted sites serve as visible symbols of the clan's identity and corporateness.

3. An even more abstract meaning can thus be attributed to the paintings. We have seen that an important part of a people's identity is their soul germ which comes from their *Wandjina*. Each individual is in this sense a personification of these Dreamtime beings, as the above quoted statement of the Aboriginal "freshener" indicates. Therefore, while individual clansmen and women identify with their own clan's paintings, a more implicit message being sent is that social order is based upon the assignment of humans to clans which are associated spiritually and ritually with tracts of land. The clans and clan estates are the essential units of the *wunan* segments, and the painted sites represent the fixed points along the *wunan*. Individual clans may become extinct, but the basic clan structure of the society must remain in force. Clan affiliation is essential to one's identity, and clans are essential for the undertaking of orderly exchanges.

4. There is a further meaning of the paintings which relates to the animal and plant figures and to the need for orderly exchanges among the clans. We have seen that the retouching ceremonies that clansmen

perform ensure the reproduction of the natural species that have their "shadows" at the clan's site. Each clan thus has the responsibility for the replenishment of certain species in the natural world. Therefore, just as groups of people were allotted during the Dreamtime to separate areas of land, so were these special relationships to the species assigned to separate groups of humans. When clansmen retouch the species represented in their gallery, they ensure the reproduction of these species not only for their own sustenance but for all humans. But they must depend upon the members of other clans to retouch the species that are not found in their own gallery. Indeed, Aborigines have told me that they believe that all the plants and animals utilized by them are located somewhere in some clan's gallery. Each clan thus contributes an allotted amount of labour to the maintenance of the world order by freshening the paintings in its own clan's gallery. I believe that the painting ceremonies thus constitute a kind of symbolic labour and that the paintings themselves symbolize the inter-dependence of the various Northwest Australian clans. For clansmen *do* depend upon one another. They depend upon one another for the exchange of food and other items. And, importantly, when foraging conditions are poor in their own clan estate, people depend upon clansmen linked to other estates to grant them permission to exploit resources there. The paintings therefore communicate to people in a highly visible and evocative way the importance of *reciprocity* among humans in assuring the continuity of the world order. This message is paramount because the threat of disorder is ever present in Aboriginal society. The extinction or overpopulation of a clan, the breakdown of exchange networks, or the refusal to grant a group foraging rights all constitute potential weaknesses in the system of reciprocities and threaten the cultural order.

5. The final meanings of the paintings considered here are both the most subtle and the most significant. Although the order of the world was set down during the Dreamtime, it is up to each generation of humans to maintain this world order. And each generation of Aborigines must accomplish this task in the face of changes that threaten the cultural order. It is through their painting *activities* that Aborigines confront the reality of change in their lives. We have seen that Aborigines consider the annual retouching of the paintings to be essential for the maintenance of the world order. By renewing the paintings, Aborigines assert the continuity of their cultural order. Changes and the resulting threat of disorder are thus dealt with symbolically: By "freshening" the paintings, Aborigines symbolically "correct" the disorder in their world

and thus denegate its significance. Therefore, when groups containing members of both the older and the younger generations travel about the land, the presence of “fresh” paintings tells them that the world *is* in order and that nothing of any importance has changed. “Fresh” paintings thus confirm the continuity of their society. Just as the order of the world became fixed for all time during the Dreamtime, so the *Wandjina* shadows are today fixed in space. The paintings are symbolic denials of change and reinforcements of the fiction of changelessness.

However, as we have seen above, the paintings will continue to be highly visible—and thus confirmations of changelessness—only if *humans* undertake the freshening ceremonies. The link between the Dreamtime behaviour of the *Wandjina* and the behaviour required of contemporary men is thus made clear through the art: The order-creating labours of the *Wandjina* must be re-created through the symbolic labours of the Aboriginal painters. It is therefore understandable why Aborigines themselves conceive of their painting activities as re-enactments of Dreamtime events. Thus Lommel’s informants told him that they blew water over the cave paintings because the *Wandjina* blew rain, *with their mouths*, over the land during the Dreamtime (see above and *cf.* Layton, 1977: 8). Similarly, *Ungud* found the first *Wandjina* in a dream at the bottom of water just as men now find soul germs of their children in dreams at the bottom of waterholes (Lommel, 1952: 12-13). Thus the paintings communicate to Aborigines’ their distinctive view of time: Time is cyclical in the sense that each year’s ceremonies are re-enactments of Dreamtime events. Finally, such a cyclical view of time encourages the repetition of reciprocal relations—reciprocal relations between human groups that are symbolically expressed in the freshening ceremonies and are analogous to symbolized relations between Humans and Nature. The freshening of the *Wandjina* and species “shadows” brings the life-giving rains. This ensures a supply of food and soul germs of human children who will continue the cycle of reciprocity with their own symbolic painting labours.

Why the Wandjina Are Mouthless

The portrayal of the *Wandjina* figures in the cave paintings as mouthless might be dismissed as a mere artistic convention. However, I believe this mouthlessness is a significant aspect of the symbolic code that conveys the meaning of the cave art to the local Aborigines. More than any other iconographic feature of the art, it is this mouthlessness which communi-

cates a model of a changeless society.¹³ For it will be recalled that during their Dreamtime activities, the *Wandjina* did have mouths through which they brought rain to the land for the propagation of natural species and the filling of waterholes which yield the souls of humans. But the *Wandjina* lost their mouths. Both Petri’s and Lommel’s informants reported that when the *Wandjina* completed their Dreamtime labours, *Ungud* told them to press their lips together until their mouths vanished (Lommel, 1952: 15). Before this, the *Wandjina* are said to have named all things. However, they can no longer speak, although they can produce a sound like thunder (Lommel, 1952: 15). But, as we have seen, there is no reason today for *Wandjina* to create either words or customs, because their order-creating labours were accomplished during the Dreamtime for time eternal. All that men need to know has been given. Thus men do not create; instead they re-create the eternal past. The mouthlessness of the painted *Wandjina* thus conveys this eternal permanence. It is the Aborigine’s ultimate symbol of a changeless world!¹⁴

It is interesting that when I have asked Aborigines from the West Kimberley tribes to produce *Wandjina* figures for me, the mouth has never been depicted (Fig. 3). However, Aborigines from outside the area of the *Wandjina* cave art type do not appear to have any qualms about mouthed *Wandjina*. For example, in 1972 members of our research expedition encountered an Aboriginal man producing *Wandjina* paintings on cardboard for sale to tourists. This man was an “immigrant” station hand from a non-local tribe which does not have the *Wandjina* type of cave art. Among the local West Kimberley Aborigines, with whom this “immigrant” was living, the portrayal of *Wandjina* figures as mouthless is both a visual shibboleth and an essential aspect of the symbolic code associated with the art. However, it would seem that this immigrant Aboriginal man did not know this symbolic code. As Figure 4 shows, his *Wandjina* figures were portrayed with mouths—teeth and all!

Dealing With Empirical Variability

The same cave art symbols may mean different things to different people and even different things to the same person as that person’s circumstances vary (*cf.* Turner, 1975: 146; Maddock, 1974: 124-125; Cohen, 1974: 36-37; Firth, 1973: 174). When children initially view the cave art, it is undoubtedly most meaningful to them as a representation of Dreamtime events that are also portrayed to them in myth. To members of the clans, the *Wandjina* and animal paintings are symbols of their identity and geographical focal points for their ceremonial activities.

As symbols, the cave art forms are open to varying interpretations. As we have seen, the art forms constitute a kind of code—a shorthand version of their multiple messages. The messages being sent are not only varied and subtle, but they are lacking in details. For example, while one message of the art is that clans are basic building blocks in social organization, this message is not explicit on such issues as the number of clans, the affiliations of individuals to given clans, or the precise boundaries of clan estates. Significantly, these are some of the very things that are so subject to variability because of demographic and environmental fluctuations.

A number of writers have discussed this lack of preciseness of symbolic meanings, noting that symbols are characteristically ambiguous (e.g. Firth, 1973). Furthermore, the continuity of cultural models appears to be facilitated because these models are communicated in broad outline. In his analysis of the Barotse legal system, Gluckman noted that “there is nothing more fatal to social organization than too precise a definition of norms” (Cohen, 1974: 37 citing Gluckman, 1955). The same point can be made for symbols as conveyors of cultural information. Continuity is assured when symbols are not too precisely defined. Therefore, principles and rules that are symbolically coded and communicated are effective and persistent precisely because they are *not* isomorphic with the on-the-ground behaviour and experiences of foragers. The ambiguity of symbols allows individuals not only to hold differing interpretations of them, but even to alter the meaning of symbols to accommodate their own circumstances.

Let me give an example from my research of a way in which individual Aborigines have been able to interpret the cave art in terms of their own fluctuating circumstances. In the early 1900’s, my genealogical data indicate that a clan called the *Ganmanjawaja* became extinct. The clan estate of these people had been located adjacent to the estate of a clan called the *Arbalandi*. These clans were in the same moiety and were thus “side-by-side” in the *wunan*. The *Arbalandi* at this time had a very large membership. One of the *Arbalandi* elders began to identify himself as a *Ganmanjawaja*, thus altering his own clan affiliation. It was also reported at this time that this individual was retouching the paintings in the clan estate of the “extinct” clan (see Blundell, 1980 for extended discussion of this case). In another example, one of my own informants has told me that he has “put himself” as a member of another clan that has also recently become extinct. In this case, both he and his son consider themselves responsible for the “extinct” clan’s paintings. Again the two clans in question are in the same moiety, are geographically adjacent, and are thus “side-by-side” in the *wunan*. In both of these

examples, the responsibility for the vacated clan estate and the associated cave paintings has “followed the *wunan*”: secondary rights of visitation that clansmen had to estates in their own moiety segment have been converted to primary rights. With these rights came the responsibility to maintain the land through the “freshening” of the paintings.

Aborigines thus appear able to alter their own clan affiliation in the face of demographic fluctuation. In Northwest Australia, this can be accomplished within the context of the existing symbolic system that is expressed by the cave art. In the above examples, individuals appear to have altered their clan affiliations, and the nature of their links to land, by reinterpreting the *specific* meaning to them of the *Wandjina* and animal paintings. Interestingly, this has been done without altering the more abstract meaning of the art symbols. The message that clans and clan estates are basic building blocks in the social and territorial organization is not altered, even though the less abstract meanings of the symbols are modified. The art form itself remains unchanged!

There is another way in which the painted art forms take on new meanings. While Aboriginal informants assert that they do not paint the original *Wandjina* or species figures in the caves, but only “retouch” them, this is clearly not the case. It would indeed seem that newly painted sites might be created as estate boundaries shifted in the context of demographic readjustments. But how might Aboriginal painters justify such innovations? Part of the answer to this question is provided by Love. When he was living among the Aborigines, Love recorded in his notes that an elder man painted the *Wandjina Namarali* at a rock shelter south of Kunmunja between January and February of 1929 (Crawford, 1978: 57). According to Love, this painting was undertaken in secrecy and during the wet season rather than at the end of the dry season (October–November) when, as we have seen, the “retouching” ceremonies are normally held. Secrecy thus appears to mask such innovations.¹⁵ The way in which such innovations are “justified” by Aboriginal painters—and viewers of the art—can be understood from data collected by Lommel (1952) and Petri (1954). Aboriginal men believe that while they are asleep they can make contact with the spiritual forces of the Dreamtime through their own dreaming (see Jensen, 1963: 123 for extended discussion). For example, we have seen that men find soul germs in their dreams. Lommel reports that the *banman* were especially imbued with such spiritual abilities and that Aborigines believed the *banman* to be “living connections between the people of the present and the Dreamtime” (1952: 40). For example, while asleep and dreaming, a *banman* could retouch paintings in a

distant place by sending his soul to that site (Lommel, 1952: 45). Individuals could report the results of their dreams and thus reveal to contemporary men forms that had their source in the Dreamtime. For example, Lommel reports that in 1938-39 an Aboriginal composer of a corroboree “found a new dance in a dream” (Lommel, 1952: 63-67). The Dreamtime spirits in this dance were armed with *guns* and *grenades*, which Lommel says were inspired by a cinema newsreel of the Japanese-Chinese war that the man had seen in the coastal town of Broome. Thus, while the Dreamtime is considered the source of all creativity, new examples of art forms, songs or dances can be introduced through the dreaming activities of elder men and they can be “justified” as contemporary revelations of the eternal present (cf. Tonkinson, 1974: 112-114). Even when new art forms, such as the painted figure of *Namarali* noted above, are “revealed”, they are broadly comparable in form to other known examples of such figures. Indeed, studies by the Western Australian Museum of thin sections of flakes from the painted caves suggest that the distinctive *Wandjina* paintings have been produced for at least the past six hundred years (see Crawford and Clarke, n.d. and Layton, 1977).¹⁶

A final example shows that the specific meaning of recently produced art forms has been revealed without erosion of the most subtle and fundamental aspects of West Kimberley cosmology. Interestingly, when Worora, Ngarinjin and Wunambal moved to Mowanjum in the 1950's, leaving their traditional homeland and their painted clan sites, they executed paintings of well-known *Wandjina* on the walls of the new community church. These *Wandjina* are now seen as representative of the three tribal groups living at Mowanjum, and their “fresh” shadows on the church wall provide the resident Aborigines with a sense of identity and continuity with their past. Through these art symbols, the oldest generation at Mowanjum has maintained its essential link with the Dreamtime and thus its belief in a changeless world. As Jensen writes for the Ngarinjin, contact with Western Civilization “has induced all kinds of changes in the external image of the culture, but the fundamental attitude toward the world has not been touched...” (1963: 126). Clearly this is true for older Kimberley Aborigines. Whether their distinctive cosmology can be successfully transmitted to yet another generation of Aboriginal children remains to be seen.



Figure 5. *Wandjina* Painting produced for the author in 1977.

Conclusions

In this paper I have agreed with the conventional anthropological notion that all human societies strive to ensure the transgenerational continuity of their cultural systems. At the same time, I have suggested that such continuity is undermined among foragers like the Australians because their lives are subject to many kinds of changes and individuals do not learn the total pool of cultural information. There is an ever present threat of disorder and thus a tension between the goal of stability and the reality of change. I have argued that this tension is particularly acute for non-literate, mobile foragers who live in small societies. The continuity which anthropologists both demand theoretically and document ethnographically is possible for Aborigines because they do not attempt to transmit all the details of each generation's cultural knowledge.¹⁷ They instead focus their intellectual and ritual energies upon the transmission of a model which indicates in broad outline the kinds of units and relationships to be employed in organizing and inter-relating Humans and Nature. Continuity is possible, secondly, because Aborigines are able to relate a variety of individual experiences to the same cultural model. I have suggested that a particularly effective

way of communicating such a model is through a symbolic medium such as the cave art (*cf.* Munn, 1973). Reliance upon symbols as vehicles for communicating cultural information allows the message to be sent at several levels of meaning in a broad, flexible, and intentionally ambiguous way. Different individuals may even interpret and re-interpret the specific meaning to them of the art figures in the context of their own circumstances without diluting the more general meaning of the symbols concerning the fundamental and unchanging model of the world. Furthermore, the disorder which arises in a world in flux can be "corrected" through symbolic painting labours that denegate disruptive changes. And finally, Aborigines can agree that "nothing ever *really* changes" because outwardly the form of their key symbols remains the same.

NOTES

1. This paper is based upon fieldwork undertaken in the West Kimberley division of Northern Australia in 1971, 1972 and 1976. A fourth expedition in 1977 was carried out jointly with Dr. Robert Layton, then of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the meetings of the Canadian Ethnology Society in March, 1981, in Ottawa. Figures 1, 2 and 3 are photographs taken by Anthony Blundell. Fig. 4 was taken by members of the 1972 research expedition. I greatly appreciate my discussions with Drs. Ruth Phillips, Bruce Cox and Jacques Chevalier of topics considered in this paper. Kirsten Mori and Sylvia Hintz kindly assisted in translating passages from Petri (1954) and Lommel (1952). My thanks also to the National Science Foundation, the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and Carleton University who have supported my research in and about Australia over the past ten years.

2. For a map showing the location of these tribes see Blundell (1974: fig. 1). Crawford (1968) illustrates *Wandjina* painted sites and provides a map (p. 16). Paintings similar to those produced by the Worora, Ngarinjin and Wunambal are found in the adjacent area of the Unggumi, and extinct tribe that is believed to have been similar in language and culture (see Blundell, 1975). For additional Kimberley tribes with a similar art style see Crawford (1968).

3. Major historical sources include King (1827), Grey (1841), Stokes (1846), Forrest (1880), Brockman (1902) and Basedow (1918). A summary of these sources is provided in Blundell (1975: Chapter III).

4. Some members of the Wunambal tribe have also become settled at Kalumburu Mission located in the northern most part of Northwest Australia (see Crawford, 1968: 16).

5. Mission records show that there were one hundred and thirty-eight Aborigines at the mission on Christmas Eve

in 1916, and the resident missionaries believed that they were in contact with between 400 and 500 Aborigines who regularly visited the mission (McKenzie, 1969: 69).

6. The group was in contact with Government agencies in Derby through visitors who provided tobacco and medical services.

7. According to a Ngarinjin informant with whom I worked in 1976-77, as directional indicators "top" means "toward sunrise", while "bottom" means "toward the ocean" or "downstream".

8. During my fieldwork informants frequently discussed everyday events in terms of the *wunan*. Thus sharing was commonly expressed with reference to the *wunan*. On one occasion there had been a fight between a Mowanjum man and a man from another area. As one informant told me: "The Elders at Mowanjum asked "Who's been fighting?" and the girls [who had witnessed the incident] said "it went down the *wunan* line" and the elders knew all the boys had joined in".

9. For an alternative version of this myth see Blundell and Layton (1978: 241-243).

10. Wunambal and Ngarinjin use the term "*Walan-ganda*" while the Worora call this being *Nadjaija*.

11. Jensen's book (1963) is an English translation of *Mythos und Kult bei Naturvölkern*, originally published in 1951. In his discussion of the *Wandjina*, Jensen draws upon the data collected by Petri (1954).

12. For a recent review of prehistoric research in Australia, see Jones (1979).

13. The meaning of other common features of *Wandjina* are more obvious. The linear markings on their bodies are said by informants to be their tribal markings while the headdress includes their hair and protuberances which are the feathers that *Wanjina* wore in the Dreamtime and the lightning which they are said to control (see Crawford, 1968: 28).

14. One of Petri's informants said that if *Ungud* had not closed the *mouhths* of the *Wandjina* "the world of the Black-Fellow would be as rich in marvelous things as that of the white man" (quoted in Jensen 1963: 126).

15. Unfortunately, Love did not provide data that would allow us to analyze the reason for this "innovation"; it may well have been the need for a visible symbol of an important *Wandjina* close to the mission where Aborigines were becoming more settled (the site where *Namarali* was painted in 1929 is about 30 miles "as the crow flies" from Kunmunya). (See discussion of Mowanjum church *Wandjina* paintings to follow in text).

16. I am, of course, *not* suggesting that there have been no changes in the past in the Northwest Australian art type, but rather that there is far greater continuity in the form of the art motif than in, say, the composition of groups such as clans. Further, because of the complexity and ambiguity of meanings associated with art forms, it is possible for interpretations of their meanings to change without the form or general type of the art changing. The way in which symbols such as art forms change is an important topic which is beyond the scope of this paper, but is addressed by Art Historians (see Anderson, 1979: Chapter 6 and Kubler, 1962; with regard to stylization of the *Wandjina* art, see Crawford, 1968).

17. Cf. Burridge (1979: Chapter 5), especially his idea that "Bits and pieces of the available knowledge were forgotten and relearned in cycles" (p. 83).

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