



Frontpiece: A large elaborately decorated human figure from the upper Wickham River, eastern Ngarinman country (see Plate 57).

**'THEY MEET UP AT BILINARA'.
ROCK ART
IN THE VICTORIA RIVER VALLEY.**

Volume 1

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Submitted for the degree of
Master Of Arts

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August 1990

Except where otherwise acknowledged, the text, photographs and line drawings in this thesis are the result of my own research.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Darrell Lewis". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.

Darrell Lewis

Cautionary note.

This thesis contains the names and photographs of deceased people. The names of these people should not be mentioned and the photographs not shown to Victoria River Aboriginal people to avoid the possibility of causing distress to relatives and friends. In addition, this thesis contains information that may cause concern to some Victoria River Aborigines if revealed in certain contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe a great debt to my wife, Dr. Deborah Rose. Debbie's anthropological research in the Victoria River region provided the key to important sections of my analysis of ^{the} region's rock art, and her support, advice, and patience, both in the field and at home, contributed immeasurably to the successful completion of this thesis. My thanks also to my daughter, Chantal, for bearing with the recluse who worked on the word processor in the back room.

I also owe a great debt to the Aboriginal people of the Victoria River valley. Many individuals gave freely of their time to answer my questions about rock art and about their culture more generally. In particular I thank Alan Young Najukpayi, Daly Pulkara, Old Tim Yilngayari (deceased), Big Mick Kangkinang (deceased), Little Mick Yinyuwinma (deceased), Hobbles Tanaiyari (deceased), Jimmy Manngayari, Barry Young Kartija, Freddy Junta, Mululu Bob, Anzac Munganyi, Hector Wanayarri, Jack Jangari, Albert Lalka, Morgan Frazer (deceased), Rook Julkiyari and Long Johnny Kitngayari (deceased).

Special thanks must go to my supervisor and colleague, Dr Andree Rosenfeld who, I can imagine, is as surprised as I am that this thesis has become more than work 'in progress'. Many other people and institutions contributed in various ways. Among those that come to mind are the Australian National University, which made the study possible by providing funds in the form of a two year scholarship, and Professor Isabel McBryde. Professor McBryde gave time and advice when requested, and was supportive through a number of difficulties which temporarily disrupted my work. Friends and colleagues Dr. Luke Taylor, Mr Ian Coates and Ms Ingereth McFarlane gave generously of their time to read drafts and offer invaluable comments.

Dr David Horton and staff of the Publications Unit at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies provided access to facilities and technical advice which enabled the thesis to reach its final standard of production. Warren Hudson of A.N.U. gave his professional, and I should add,

perfectionist touch to many of the photographs reproduced here. Any fault with the photographs is definitely not due to Warren's work.

For once, Professor John Mulvaney has nothing to answer for, except perhaps his constant inquiries which would not let me escape the fact that I had a thesis to write! My thanks are due to Mr Robert Paton for his regular visits which delayed us both from finishing our respective theses. Unfortunately other commitments eventually prevented Robert from dropping in for coffee and biscuits so he must take partial responsibility for the fact that my thesis is now finished. Lastly, I thank God that the thesis is finished, but hasten to add that any good ideas and any shortcomings are mine alone.

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PREFACE

'In parts of the Northern Territory whitemen were still being speared in the 1930's....there are places in the outback where whites have not been for fifty or sixty years....the Aborigines lived off the land and were the best trackers in the world' (pers. comm., Laurie Lewis, circa 1955).

The past few years has seen the emergence of a critical assessment of the relationship between the ethnographer and the society being studied (for example see Agar 1984; Marcus and Fischer 1986). One result has been the recognition that '...ethnographies are a function of the different traditions of ethnographer, group, and intended audience' (Agar 1984: 783). Given that my research has a strong ethnographic component, I believe it appropriate to include here a summary of the traditions, influences and chance events that led me to ethno-archaeology and shaped the methodology I used.

The research methodology underlying this thesis has its origins in romance - the romantic images of Australia's explorers, pioneers, Aborigines, and the unlimited 'wilderness' of the early days. In the Riverina district of New South Wales where I grew up, these images were the stuff of childhood fantasies, received wisdom of a period long since past. Wheat now grew and sheep grazed in small paddocks where once wild bush prevailed. Stock was moved short distances in trucks instead of on great treks with drovers, and the Aborigines were said to have 'died out' in the times beyond human memory. Yet it was commonly believed that 'out there' - in the centre and north of the continent - time had somehow stood still and what was now the folklore of the south-east remained a living reality.

Like many young Australians of the 1950's, I was interested in and influenced by these idealised images of the 'early days', but my own interests were somewhat more extensive and intense than those of my peers. To my fascination with various aspects of Australian history was added an equally intense interest in the natural world - fossils and minerals, flora and fauna. In short, my

interests included almost everything to be found in the Australian environment.

Unlike most of my peers, my interest in these topics grew, rather than diminished, with age. This was especially the case with the Aborigines. The acquisition of a stone axe, visits to old camping grounds and even, on one memorable occasion, a lecture and field trip given by one Professor Jack Golson, all served to intensify my curiosity about the vanished tribes. By the time I had reached mid-teens, I found bushwalking to be an ideal way to combine these interests and I eventually developed bushcraft skills that would be crucial to the success of many projects in years to come.

Victoria River Revealed

My first opportunity to visit 'out there' came in 1971 when I joined a Bureau of Mineral Resources (B.M.R.) geological survey of the basalts of Victoria River/Ord River districts of the Northern Territory and Western Australia (Map 1). It was during this work that the romantic images of childhood gained a degree of substance. Here, for example, Aboriginal and European stockmen still lived and worked in rough conditions, eating beef and damper. Parts of the cattle runs were relatively unknown; wildlife abounded.

The nature of my employment precluded more than minimal contact with local Aborigines whose outward appearance in any case suggested a considerable gulf between them and their recent ancestors. However, throughout the region I saw numerous surface scatters of stone artefacts, stone arrangements and quarries. I also visited eight rock art sites. These signs of traditional Aboriginal life, and especially the discovery of a few broken boomerangs, brought a sense of immediacy, a feeling that what was in the south a hundred years gone was here only yesterday. At the time I did not realise that this was, literally, the truth. My lasting impression of the Victoria/Ord district was of a

vast area of basalt plains, and limestone and sandstone ranges, rich in surface scatters of stone tools and potentially rich in rock art sites.

Soon after my return to New South Wales, late in 1971, an opportunity arose to work as a volunteer on an archaeological survey and excavation in the Snowy Mountains region. In the course of this work I soon realised that prehistory was a topic combining elements of all my lifelong interests; my interest in a career in Aboriginal studies was thus consolidated.

In April 1972 I returned to the north to rejoin the Bureau of Mineral Resources, this time as part of a team involved in the Alligator Rivers Fact Finding Study. My offer to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies to record any Aboriginal sites encountered during this work led to a meeting with the late Eric Brandl. Eric's intense interest in rock art, his equally intense encouragement, and my subsequent encounters with numerous spectacular rock art galleries established Aboriginal rock art as my primary interest in the field of Aboriginal prehistory. Although western Arnhem Land rock art became a passion, I did not forget the Victoria River district.

From the end of the B.M.R. survey in November 1972, there followed a period of several years during which I often went bushwalking in south-eastern New South Wales specifically to locate and record Aboriginal sites. I also worked as a volunteer on archaeological projects in north-eastern Victoria and south-eastern Cape York.

Meeting the Victoria River Aborigines

In 1975 I was employed by the Northern Territory Museum to record Aboriginal sites in the Victoria River district. My instructions were to begin work at Wattie Creek (Daguragu; Map 2) because a researcher (Patrick McConvell) who could provide an entree to the community was already established there. That was all I was told. I was given no inkling of what to expect, and the fleeting, eminently superficial impressions of the Aborigines I

had gained in 1971 did nothing to prepare me for what I encountered at Wattie Creek.

Within days I was completely culture-shocked. On the one hand, the physical conditions of life were appalling. Housing ranged from humpies of branches, scrap corrugated iron and canvas to recently built but dilapidated small brick shacks. The only 'facilities' were water taps in the rubbish-strewn, dusty yards. Communal toilet/shower blocks were almost universally clogged and overflowing, with raw sewerage forming bogs near the doorways. Consequently, human faeces littered the ground throughout the community.

To the stench of human effluent was added the stink of rotting meat that had been discarded here and there amongst the dwellings. As would be expected, flies were swarming and health problems rampant - in fact, the hepatitis that I came down with some weeks later was contracted during my first two weeks in Wattie Creek.

Adding to these 'inconveniences' were hordes of decrepit dogs and a herd of semi-feral goats, all of which took every opportunity to raid unguarded food and belongings at any time of the day or night. Frequently the dogs would chase the goats up and down the camp, raising a cacophony of yelping and bleating, a cloud of dust, and the ire of the people.

On the other hand, the social conventions and local krio had to be mastered primarily on a trial and error basis. My youthful enthusiasm and desire to create a good impression with my new employer often conflicted with Aboriginal attitudes and priorities. Added to this was the shock of first-hand experience of extreme racial hatred expressed by many cattle station Europeans, no doubt exacerbated by the recent Aboriginal strike (see Doolan 1977) and the imminent passage of land rights legislation through Federal Parliament.

In a real sense I was walking a tight-rope. It was clear to me that I did not have the training or experience to work effectively with Aborigines. Another handicap was my youth and status as a single

man. In a society where ritual knowledge and social standing is concomitant with age, I felt it somewhat insulting to the old men that I, as a young unmarried white man, should be sent to record Dreaming sites and to seek information that would normally be restricted to much more senior people.

In the face of these difficulties, it was obvious that the job was ideally suited to an older person, qualified by experience and/or academic training. I eventually pointed this out to my employer and offered to resign if a more appropriate person could be found. The offer was refused. I remained in the position and, by trial and (fortunately few) errors, I began to learn the skills necessary for working effectively with Aboriginal people.

This work confirmed the existence of many rock art sites in the region and revealed that the art was still part of local Aboriginal peoples' on-going traditional culture. I visited twenty-one rock art sites with Aboriginal custodians and discovered that not only were interpretations of individual motifs available, but that an understanding of the function of the art within the traditional society might also be learned.

Funding for this job was cut in mid-1976 and another period of intermittent, casual employment and unpaid field-work ensued. This included six weeks helping record rock art sites in the Central Queensland ranges. By late 1977 I was back in the Victoria River area again, working for a month recording sites for the forthcoming land claims at Top Springs, and at Jasper Gorge and Kidman Springs. Three of the sites I recorded were galleries of rock art. In contrast to the traumatic times with the museum, this work was easy, enjoyable, and productive. Although of short duration, this fieldwork marked a turning point in my working relationships with Aboriginal people.

Apart from a few days working on the Top Springs land claim in 1978, I did not return to Victoria River until 1980. By this time I was in the second year of an honours degree in prehistory at the Australian National University.

In July 1980 I met my future wife, Debbie Rose. Debbie had only recently arrived in Australia, seeking a field location to carry out research for a doctorate in anthropology. By chance, she was eventually accepted by Yarralin community on Victoria River Downs, the same people I had worked with in 1977. I joined Debbie in the field and between November 1980 and June 1982 I spent a total of sixteen months living at Yarralin. This resulted in an intensive education in Aboriginal culture and facilitated the development of relationships of trust and friendship between myself and many Aboriginal people in the region. I was also able to visit another forty-five art sites, six of these with Aboriginal custodians.

It was during this time that the necessary basis for future research was firmly established. When the time came to attempt field work for my masters thesis, I knew the social rules governing access to country. I knew how and of whom to ask permission to visit areas where I had previously been told or suspected rock art sites were located. In turn, the Aborigines knew I was competent in the bush and that I would respect places and knowledge which were restricted or 'dangerous' in Aboriginal terms. Without these relationships, established over a nine year period, the type of research I eventually carried out for my Masters thesis would have been at best difficult, and more than likely impossible.

I completed my honours degree in 1983, writing a thesis on the rock paintings of Arnhem Land. The following year I applied for an A.N.U. scholarship to do research for a Masters degree. The topic I chose was the rock art of the Victoria River district. This thesis is the result of that research.

Aims of the Research

The aims of this thesis are twofold. One is to describe the rock art of the Victoria River valley, which until this time remains little known. This description will include the range of motifs, the techniques used, and an attempt to develop a chronology of styles and techniques. The other aim is to explore the

ethnography of the art, including the way in which Victoria River Aborigines identify individual motifs and the role the art plays in their society.

Previous Research

The earliest reference to Victoria River rock art is that of the explorer Thomas Baines (1857-58: 7), who sketched a number of paintings while a member of the North Australian Exploring Expedition of 1855-56 (Plates 1, 2 and 3; see Chapter 5). Discoveries of rock art continued after permanent settlement. Willshire (1896) mentions finding rock art at different places in the district (*ibid*: 31, 45, 53, 57-8 and 59), and further states that paintings are found in caves throughout the region (*ibid*: 49). Mathews (1901: 82) is more specific:

Rock paintings are fairly numerous in the Victoria River basin, especially on Gordon and Jasper Creeks, the Wickham and elsewhere. The watercourses are bounded by rocky escarpments, the bases of which are hollowed out in places by the action of the weather and other causes. In these depressions, which are more or less sheltered from the rain, the natives draw pictures of alligators, fish, human beings, flying foxes, kangaroos and other things, in pipe-clay, red ochre and charcoal. In some places where there is a sufficient rock surface the natives delineate an immense snake-like monster, twenty or thirty feet in length, which is said to have dug out waterholes and formed rivers in olden times.

Sporadic reports continued throughout this century and a number of photographs or illustrations were published (eg Basedow 1907: 54-57 and 1925; Birtles 1910; Dahl 1926; and Anon 1955). Stanner (1960; 1979) published photographs and ethnographic accounts of paintings from a number of sites on the lower Fitzmaurice River and another site close by in the Victoria River catchment.

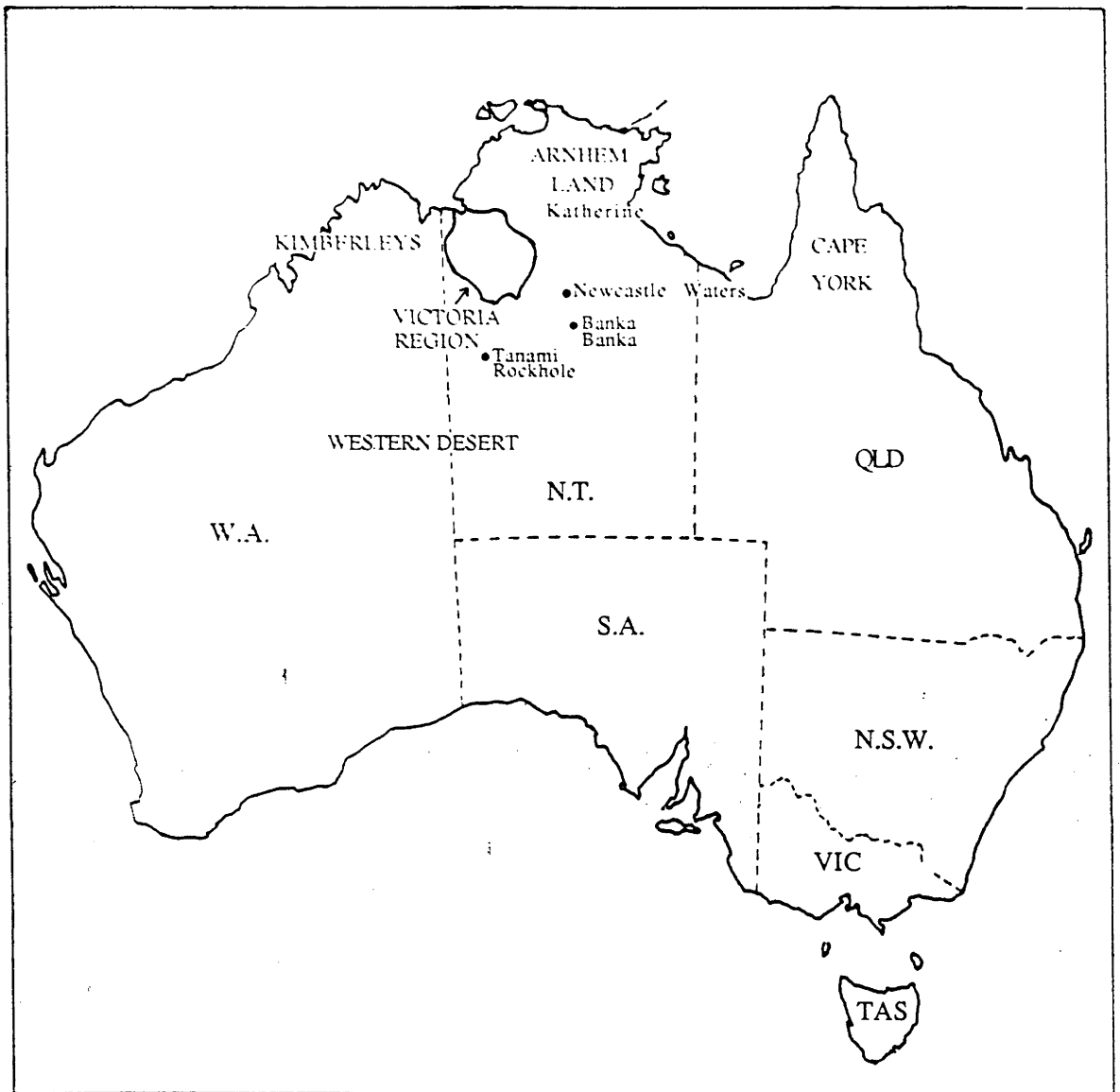
On the eastern fringe of the Victoria River valley and into the Flora (Daly/Katherine) catchment, two sites - the Lightning Brothers and Ingalladi - have become well-known through the

work of Davidson (1936), Harney (1957), Arndt (1962), Mountford and Brandl (1968), Mulvaney (1975) and Chaloupka (1978). Since 1988 work has been carried out on Wardaman rock art by the 'Earthwatch' organisation, and one of the participants has published a preliminary report on 'the interpretive framework of Wardaman rock art' (Merlan 1989).

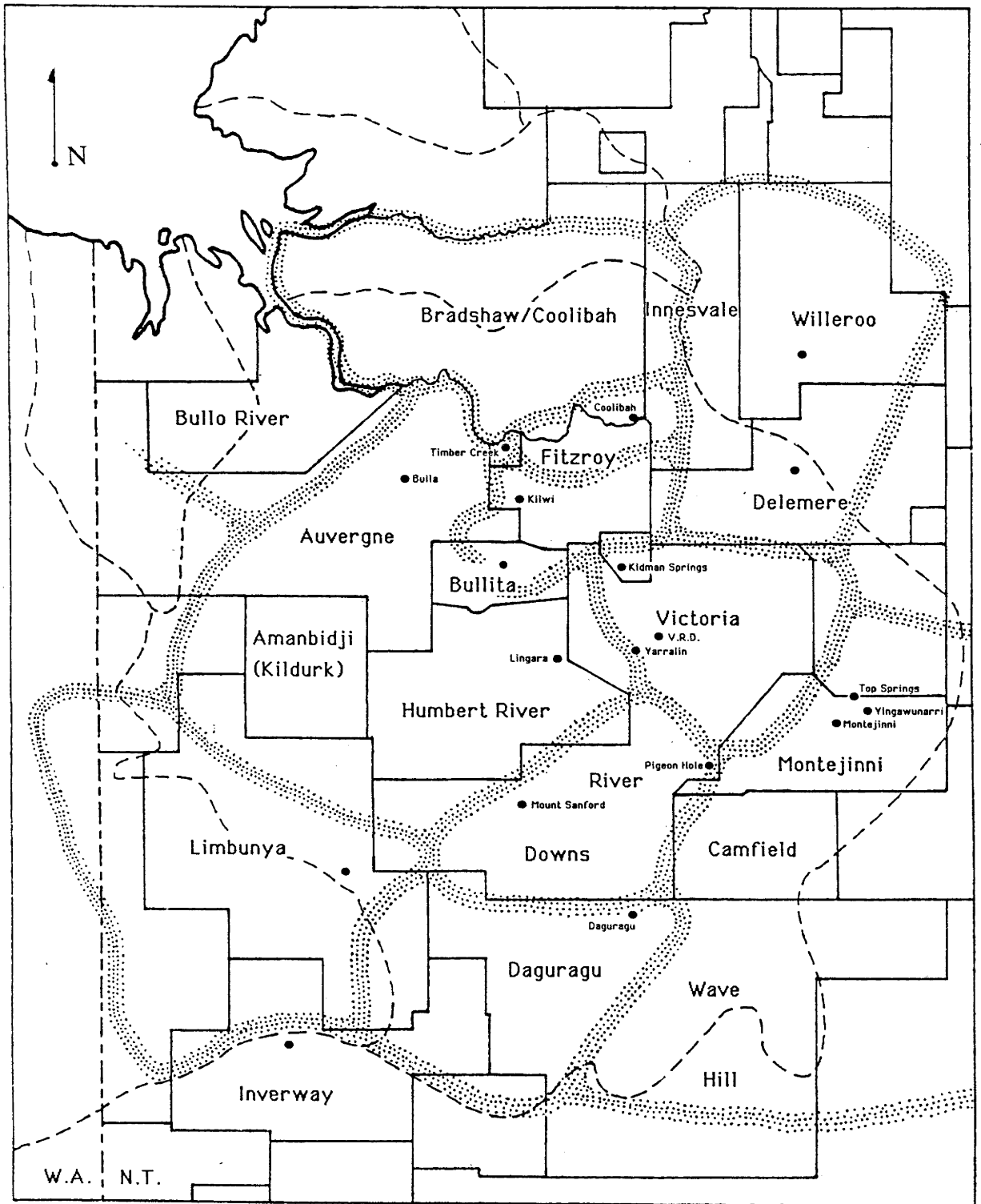
With such early and ongoing reports of rock art in the Victoria River valley, it may be surprising that in-depth studies were not begun many years ago. Perhaps Arndt (1965: 243) provides the answer:

Missions were not established, and ethnologists were not welcome. The "soft touch" of the anthropologist was regarded as a threat to the maintenance of discipline and there were locally justifiable dark deeds to hide from the prying eyes. This ban was effective because one man, viz. the manager of Victoria River Downs (V.R.D.) station controlled 18,000 square miles, and it was extremely difficult to travel or survive in this area without his approval and material assistance.

Today the soft touch of the anthropologist (or archaeologist) is still not particularly welcome. During my masters field research, I was able to travel throughout Victoria River Downs and Humbert River station only by maintaining a 'low profile'. I was allowed to enter Innesvale, Coolibah and Bradshaw stations (see Map 2) to look for rock art, but not in the company of Aborigines. In April 1989 I was one of a party of lawyers and land council employees who attempted to visit Pigeon Hole, an Aboriginal community on Victoria River Downs (Map 2). On this occasion we met with locked gates, vehicles blocking the road, and veiled threats. We were buzzed by helicopters, and were finally issued with a court order restraining us from entering the property !



Map 1: Australian continent with Victoria River valley indicated.



Map 2: Pastoral boundaries and population centres in the Victoria River valley (catchment areas and language areas also marked).

1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis is concerned with the rock art of the Victoria River valley, in the north-west of the Northern Territory. Included within the Victoria River catchment are the East and West Baines Rivers, the Wickham River, Humbert River and Bullo River, and numerous other major streams (Map 3).

The valley is the home of a number of Aboriginal groups (see Map 3). The Gurindji, Bilinara, Karangpurru, eastern, western and Wolayi Ngarinman, Ngaliwurru and Nungali are language-defined groups whose traditional lands lie wholly within the bounds of the valley. The Mudbura, divided into eastern, central and western groups, straddle the watershed that divides the south-eastern portion of the region from the desert while Malngin territory overlaps the headwaters of the Victoria River, but lies largely within the Ord River valley. Miriwung territory may lie partly within the Victoria River valley, but is primarily within the Ord River and Keep River catchments. Jaminjung territory extends from the northern bank of the Victoria River to the southern bank of the Fitzmaurice River.

According to Ngarinman traditions, the Baines River country, now regarded as Ngarinman territory, was formerly occupied by a group called the Nyiwanawu who were at odds with the Ngarinman. In one version of the story the Nyiwanawu were exterminated by the Ngarinman and their lands taken over because they were cannibals. Another version has it that after a period of warfare with the Ngarinman, the Nyiwanawu were wiped out by the first European settlers. Map 3 shows the different language territories as they are now known to Victoria River Aborigines. In comparison with other Victoria River language areas, Ngarinman territory is exceptionally large and it is likely that this is the result of Ngarinman expansion sometime before the turn of the century.

According to Tindale (1974) Kajerong territory straddles the mouth of the Victoria River and extends to the southern bank of the Fitzmaurice River. Tindale also has a small group, the Alura,

located on the eastern bank of the lower Victoria. The concensus among Victoria River Aborigines is that Kajerong territory lies entirely to the west of the Victoria River while all the country between the Fitzmaurice and Victoria Rivers is Jaminjung country. It is probably now impossible to determine whether Tindale's 'Alura' was more than a sub-group of Jaminjung or whether Kajerong territory did once extend across the Victoria River, as Tindale believed. In the Victoria River region in general, Tindale's 'tribal' boundaries only roughly correspond to language-defined territories as they are now understood by Aboriginal people. In this thesis I follow the advice of my informants.

The territory of the Wardaman lies largely within the catchment of the Flora River, a Daly River tributary, but overlaps the north-east corner of the Victoria River valley (see Map 3). The Wardaman share some cultural characteristics, and maintain various links, with groups in the Victoria River valley, but these links are not as strong as those that bind these other groups to each other. Davidson (1935: 145) lists a number of differences between the Wardaman and their southern and northern neighbours.

Like all tribes to their south, their initiation ceremonies are marked by both circumcision and sub-incision. The tribes to their north, however, practice only the former. The northern boundary of the Wardaman also forms the approximate northern limit of the use of the boomerang. Their southern boundary, where they meet the Ngainman (sic) tribe, represents the most northern limit of the shield and the southernmost appearance of...the arm-band.

There are few links in mythology between the Wardaman and groups to their west, nor is Wardaman language related to other Victoria River languages. It is in fact the most southerly member of the Gunwinyguan Family, other languages of which are located in Arnhem Land (Walsh 1983).

Wardaman rock art possesses much in common with rock art in the rest of the Victoria River valley, but also exhibits many significant differences. Although I make frequent reference to Wardaman art throughout this thesis, the rock art of this language

area should not be taken to epitomise Victoria River rock art as a whole, for such is not the case.

In this thesis I am dealing with rock art from all of these language-defined areas; my most intensive samples are from the Bilinara and Ngarinman areas.

Methodology

In July 1984 I set out to begin my Masters degree field research. Although I had previously worked with members of all of the language groups mentioned above, and at all of the regional communities, the focal point for my research was obvious; with the experience gained and relationships established over the previous nine years, the people I knew best were the Ngarinman, Ngaliwurru and Bilinara whose traditional lands were largely with and adjacent to Victoria River Downs and Humbert River station. I also knew that areas within the territories of those language groups that were likely to contain concentrations of rock art. I was immediately able to approach the appropriate traditional owners, explain my interests, and ask permission to 'footwalk' in particular tracts of country. These requests were readily agreed to.

As most of the art sites in the Victoria River valley are in locations inaccessible to motor vehicle - for example, up steep escarpments or deep in gorges - and because many of the senior Aboriginal people are of advanced age or in poor health, I was able to visit very few places in the company of traditional owners. This situation had a number of advantages as well as the obvious disadvantages.

The advantage was that I could locate and record the art at my own speed. To gain a fair understanding of the range of motifs, styles and techniques in each language area, I needed to record a large number of sites. I did not, of course, know beforehand how many sites I would find, so I needed the freedom to explore a lot of country in a short time. The pace of a 'hyped-up' archaeologist would have been incompatible with the casual style of the

Aborigines, and if I had relied on Aboriginal people to guide me to each art site I would have recorded very few art sites in the limited time available. Equally, the time taken to document sites fully (photographs, sketches, descriptions etc.) could well have been tedious to others.

The obvious disadvantage was that I could not discuss the art with Aborigines at the site, a method which prior experience had shown could stimulate the memory and interest of Aboriginal informants. In view of this, my field method consisted of two stages; first, locating and recording the art sites and second, bringing representations of the art to the Aboriginal custodians.

Stage 1: Recording the Art

In the first stage, I went on walks of two to three weeks through rough sandstone areas to locate as many sites as possible. Most of the art sites discussed within this thesis were located by this method. A small number of sites were also accessible by motor vehicle. During the 1984 and 1985 field seasons I recorded a total of one hundred and seventy two art sites: one hundred and twelve in Bilinara country, thirty one in Wardaman country, sixteen in Jaminjung country and thirteen in Ngarinman country.

Sites were documented using both black and white and colour slide photography. I used notebooks rather than standardised site cards in which to record written information. I made detailed freehand drawings of each motif (care being taken to indicate the correct size and relative juxtapositions of the motifs in each gallery), and took notes of the size, condition, colour scheme, technique used, and any special features of the motifs. Other information recorded included a description of the site itself - its dimensions, the presence of any other archaeological remains such as burials, occupation debris or contact items, its aspect, the nearest water and so forth.

Standardised site recording cards were not used because their bulk, weight, and loose-leaf format were inappropriate for use in a context where access to most sites required carrying heavy

loads of food and equipment in a backpack. Furthermore, I find site cards to be a relatively inflexible means of recording site information.

Stage 2: Recording Interpretations

Because of the prohibitive expense involved in producing large format prints, and because it was frequently impossible to record all of the art in the galleries in only one or two photographs, I decided not to work from photographs when discussing the sites with the Aboriginal custodians. Instead, I reproduced the galleries as coloured drawings in large artists sketch-pads.

Using this method, I was often able to reproduce an entire gallery on an open spread of two pages in the pad. I could also clarify some motifs which might not show up in photographs, and include annotations from either my field notes or, later, from the Aborigines themselves. Correct superimpositioning was adhered to and the relative weathering of different motifs was carefully indicated by shading and smudging.

Armed with 106 pages of sketches representing 75 individual art sites, I began a series of tape-recorded interviews with men I knew to be traditional owners of the different areas I had visited - men who were knowledgeable in ritual affairs and old enough to speak for country. The identities and brief personal histories of my principal informants are detailed in Chapter 8. The interviews were conducted in North Australian Kriol and English, and a total of eleven hours of interviews were recorded.

I had a particular reason for seeking out only men as informants. Many aspects of Aboriginal society in the Victoria River area are organised on the basis of gender. One aspect of gender-defined social organisation in this area is the strict separation of young single men from women. When I began work with the Northern Territory Museum in 1975 I was a single man and at that time it was appropriate that I develop friendships only with men. Although I am now a married man, permitted to engage in friendly discourse with Aboriginal women, I have not developed

working relationships with women as close as those I have developed with men. Gender separation is particularly evident in the organisation of specialised knowledge. There was therefore little chance that, had I asked women, I would have been told other than totally public information about the art - information that I would in any case be likely to learn from men. It was, of course, completely inappropriate for me to document women's art sites.

I conducted intensive interviews with seven men, usually completing an interview in one session. On two occasions, the interviews were carried out in the bush, away from other people. Otherwise I conducted the interviews in Aboriginal communities at Pigeon Hole, Yarralin, Lingara, and Bunjari (a community near Katherine). Interviews held at the communities usually attracted the interest of other people, some of whom assisted for short periods by providing additional details about a motif being discussed. Sometimes a particular motif was discussed among several men before an identification was made.

In order not to pre-empt the informants interpretations of each motif I marked each page of my sketch pad with consecutive numbers and, as each motif was discussed, I labelled it with a letter from the alphabet. Then, while tape recording my interviews with each man, I mentioned the motif designation - 'figure 17A', or whatever the case was at the time. By this method I was also able easily to relate the taped information to the appropriate sketch.

Additional Field Research

My 'on-course' Masters degree field work finished in November 1985. However, the completion date was extended because I suspended my studies to take on temporary work relevant to my research. For two months I was a consultant to the Australian Heritage Commission, documenting European and Aboriginal sites (predominantly rock art sites) in my research area. The other four months I was employed as a consultant to the Northern Land Council. This consultancy was to continue work I

had begun on the Jasper Gorge/Kidman Springs land claim in 1977. It also involved work on another land claim further to the south near Pigeon Hole, an outstation of Victoria River Downs (see Map 2).

Both claims were on behalf of Aborigines who are the custodians of the rock art sites that are the focus of this study. Much of the information gathered in preparation for the claims, and evidence elicited from the claimants during the hearings, contributed greatly to my understanding of Victoria River culture, including rock art. Several new art sites were visited with custodians during site mapping for the claims: two in Bilinara country and one in Karangpurru country.

In addition, my work on these claims was an important part of the reciprocity inherent in my relationship with the Aborigines of this area. In applying the knowledge they had taught me to a matter that had profound implications for their future, I was able, to some degree, to repay the generosity which the people had extended to me.

The hearing for the Jasper Gorge/Kidman Springs land claim did not finish until August 1988. The hearing for the Bilinara land claim concluded in July, 1989. At the close of the hearing for the Pigeon Hole land claim the Northern Land Council requested that my wife, Dr Deborah Rose, produce a history of the Ngarinman people on Amanbidji Station (formerly Kildurk), for the forthcoming Amanbidji land claim. In late July 1989, we spent a week together on Amanbidji and at Kununurra recording oral traditions. I then spent a week on a private research project with Jimmy Manngayari, recording Dreaming and historic sites on Limbunya Station, and a further three weeks walking through the Baines River and Bullo River catchments to record contact art for use in the history and of course, in this thesis.

During the 1989 field season, I recorded a further fifty two sites: thirty six in Ngarinman country, ten in Kajerong country, six in Malngin country and two in Ngaliwurru country. These additional art sites significantly increased my understanding of the range of rock art styles, motifs and techniques found in the Victoria River

district. In total, I have recorded 306 rock art sites in or adjacent to the Victoria River valley.

Art, Ritual, and Social Change

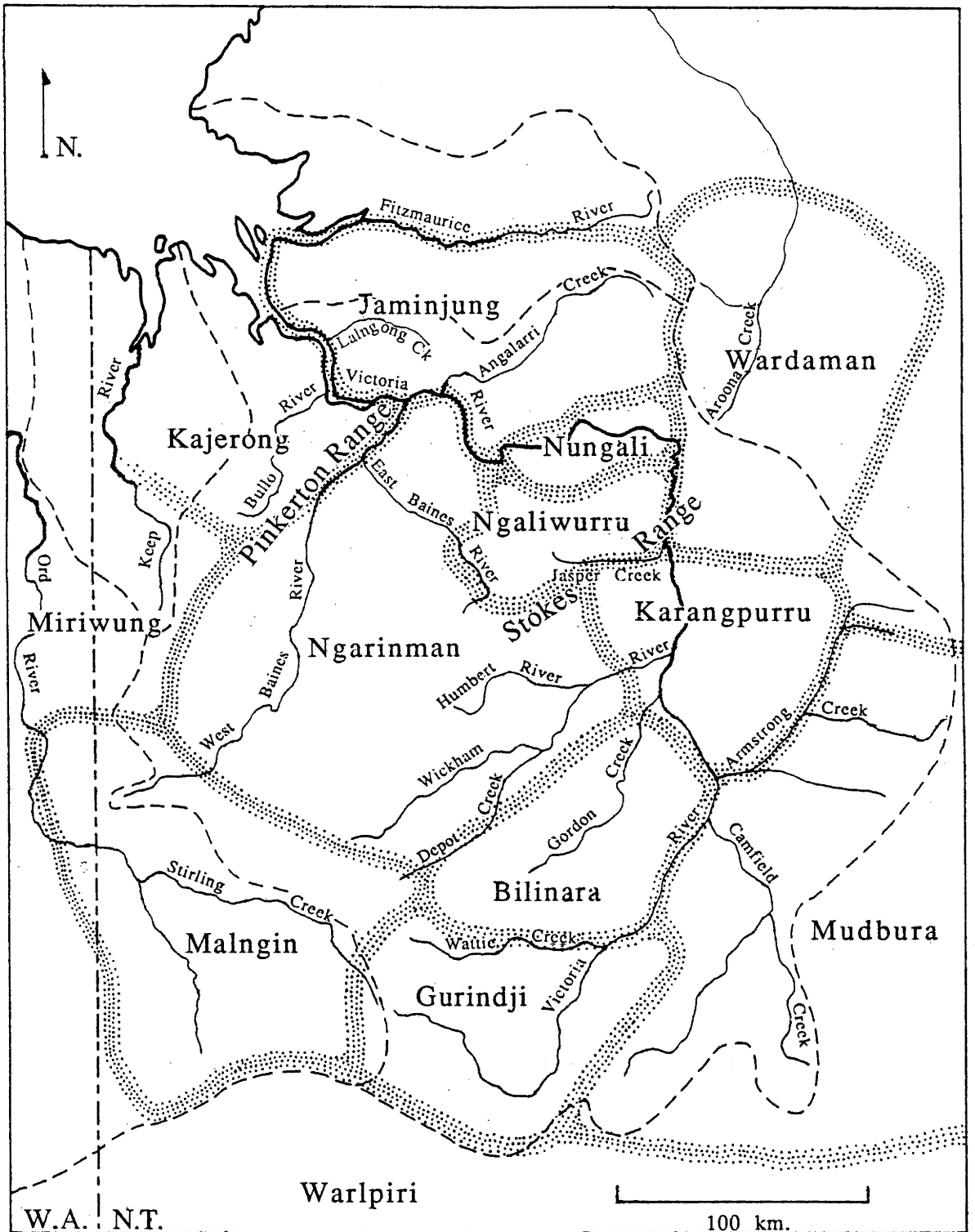
This thesis is divided into three parts. In Chapters 2 to 5, I place the rock art of the Victoria River valley in its environmental, prehistoric, and historical context. I describe the range of motifs present and the techniques used in the region, and discuss the evidence for a chronology of styles and techniques.

In Chapters 6 to 10, I outline those aspects of Victoria River Aboriginal cosmology, social organisation, land tenure, and ritual life which are of relevance to analysis of the region's rock art. I examine the social role of rock art among Victoria River Aborigines, and analyse how members of the societies interpret and understand it. In addition, I compare the traditional land tenure system with observed distribution patterns in the art, and conclude that the only social unit which seems to correspond to a pattern in the art is the regional culture area (Peterson 1976).

The culture area is larger than the language-defined group (tribe) which has often been taken to be a major social unit. This conclusion has implications for anthropological definitions of socially meaningful local units, and adds considerable weight to Peterson's (1976) work on culture areas. It also has implications for the study and interpretation of rock art in areas for which there are no informants or in which ethnographic records are inadequate.

In Chapters 11 and 12, I offer an analysis of the region's rock art in terms of regional ethnohistory. This analysis reveals that although a number of major changes have occurred in Victoria River Aboriginal society during the last few hundred years, these changes do not appear to be reflected in the art. The art remained remarkably constant during a period when there were several episodes of social devastation, a major elaboration of social organisation, and a major reorientation in religious concepts. This has implications for study of prehistoric art elsewhere: in

the absence of clear indications of change in rock art, archaeologists cannot assume that the society that produced the art was unchanging.



Map 3: Victoria River language areas and major rivers and creeks (catchment areas also marked).

2 THE REGION: PAST AND PRESENT

Topography

The great Victoria River Valley of the Northern Territory lies halfway between the Kimberley district to the west, and Arnhem land to the north-east (see Map 1). From the sand plains of the desert fringe, the Victoria River winds northward through increasingly well-watered savanna grasslands and ranges, cuts through the massive Victoria River Gorge, and meets the salt water at the head of the Joseph Bonaparte Gulf. Estuarine conditions extend inland for well over 100 kilometres and along the lower section the river passes through some of the highest and most rugged ranges in the valley. Mesas and flat-topped ranges of broken sandstone and limestone, and ranges of basalt border much of the Victoria catchment or extend haphazardly across the valley floor through a mosaic of basalt, limestone, and sand plains (Plates 4-11).

The Keep River and Ord River valleys are characterised by similar landform features and the rugged sandstone range country of the Victoria River region extends into the northern part of the Fitzmaurice River catchment (see Map 4). To the east, an area of flat, relatively featureless and very dry country separates the catchment of the Victoria River from that of the Roper River (Map 4).

Climate

The climate in this region is monsoonal - extremely dry from May to October with rainfall usually confined to the summer months. By European Australian standards, seasonal conditions are extremely harsh. In fact, Lee's (1969) study of human adaptation in tropical environments indicates that this area has the most prolonged period of humid tropical conditions in Australia; on an average of 225 days per year, heat and humidity combine to exceed human comfort levels (ibid: 234).

In July, the coldest month, average temperatures range from a minimum of about 10 degrees to a maximum of 27 degrees Celsius (Plumb 1973: map 4). By the end of the dry season dessication may be extreme - all but the major waters have dried up, ground cover is sparse and the soil dusty and cracked. With the approaching summer, massive thunderheads appear, bringing violent electrical displays and erratic, turbulent winds that often produce short, fierce dust storms.

During the summer months (October to February), continuous high humidity is accompanied by daily temperatures of up to 45 degrees and average overnight lows of about 30 degrees Celsius (ibid). Most of the annual rain fall occurs during summer, and average rainfall figures range from 700 mm in the north of the valley to 330 mm in the south (ibid). These average figures mask the true situation - rainfall varies significantly from year to year. During one summer fierce electrical storms may be the only source of rainfall while another summer may experience true monsoonal rains several times, so that one season may be comparatively dry and another season may experience major flooding.

Vegetation

On the basis of natural vegetation, influenced by rainfall patterns, the region can be divided into three zones - woodlands and tall grasslands in the northern high rainfall areas, sparse low woodlands in the intermediate rainfall area, and in the arid south, shrublands (Perry 1970). The greater part of the Victoria River valley receives an intermediate rainfall.

The foregoing description provides a generalised summary of native vegetation present in the area today. However, there is evidence which suggests that the introduction of European livestock has had a severe impact on some flora species, particularly some of the smaller plants such as shrubs, herbs, and grasses, and on freshwater plant communities.

For example, the explorer Gregory described dense banks of reeds (*Typha* spp.) bordering many sections of the rivers and creeks in the region (Gregory 1981: 114-115, 146-47, 149). One of the expedition members later wrote that the horses found the reeds especially palatable (Wilson 1858: 145). Today reeds are very rare, and I have ~~only~~ seen them growing^{only} at three locations in the entire Victoria River region.

Another early account mentions 'saltbush' and 'bluebush' growing on Victoria River Downs (Crawford, cited in Parsons 1885: 2). It remains unknown whether these are the same species as those renowned for their value as stock feed; both appear to be entirely absent today. Current ethno-botanical research by Dr Deborah Rose indicates that many plant species which were formerly major subsistence foods for the Aborigines, are now highly restricted in their range; some may be locally extinct (Rose pers. comm.).

Prehistory

Initial human occupation of Australia is now generally accepted to have occurred about 40-50,000 years ago (Mùlvaney and White 1987: XV; White and Lambert 1987: 11; Roberts *et al* 1990). As the most likely entry to Australia was from the north, there is no reason to believe that the Victoria River valley was not occupied at that time. In the Alligator Rivers region to the north-east, numerous sites have been radio-carbon dated to well in excess of 20,000 years (Kamminga and Allen 1973; Schrire 1982; Jones and Johnson 1985), and one of these sites has given a thermoluminescence date of at least 50,000 years BP (Roberts *et al* 1990).

In the Ord River valley to the west, several sites are known to have been first occupied about 20,000 years ago (Dortch 1977), and recently a site on Koolan Island off the west Kimberley coast has been dated to more than 27,000 BP (O'Connor 1989: 102).

Although in terms of direct research, the prehistory of the Victoria River region remains virtually unknown, the region is

effectively bracketed by the work of Davidson (1935) and Mulvaney (1975) in the east, and Dortch (1977) and Crawford (cited in Dortch 1977) in the west. By looking at the results obtained by these researchers, a general outline of Victoria River prehistory may be proposed.

Davidson's Work

In 1930 the American anthropologist D. S. Davidson (1935) conducted archaeological investigations of an unspecified number of rock shelters at two locations near the eastern watershed of the Victoria River valley. One group of sites, on Willeroo Station, lies on the catchment of the Flora River. The other group is in 'a great gulch' on a tributary of the Victoria River, on Delemere Station (Map 2). Those who know something of the history of the Victoria River district and who have had first-hand experience of present-day conditions, can appreciate Davidson's achievement in conducting field work in what was still, in the 1930's, a remote and sometimes violent frontier (see Chapter 5).

Davidson's excavations indicated a change in stone tool technology - from mainly scrapers and adzes near base level to predominantly points in the upper level. They also revealed a range of other tool types in sites in the area. The sites he excavated were not stratified and, with radio-carbon dating still twenty years in the future, Davidson could only report a '...feeling that many hundreds of years are involved...' and that '...none of the deposits....gave the impression that millenia were concerned' (Davidson 1935: 153-154). Unfortunately, Davidson never published detailed analyses of his excavations, exact locations of his sites or the number of sites he excavated, and neither his field notes nor his excavated materials can now be located.

The most enduring value of Davidson's study lies in his ethnographic observations of the local Wardaman people with whom he worked. As well as information concerning territorial limits, trade in various goods, and technological change, Davidson provides valuable insights into the dynamics of rock shelter deposition, and his work is relevant to the interpretation of

shelter sites elsewhere. For example, he describes the Wardaman practice of burying quartzite points for safe keeping in the earth at the base of shelter walls, the burial of human remains in shelter floors, and the caching of valued goods and human bones in wall niches (ibid: 151-53). In another paper, Davidson (1936: 56-60, 108-20) also provides interesting data on Wardaman interpretations of their rock engravings and paintings.

Ingaladdi Rockshelter

Davidson's research on Willeroo Station was followed by that of Mulvaney who excavated at Ingaladdi rockshelter in 1963 and 1966 (Mulvaney 1969; 1975). Mulvaney's work showed that the site was first occupied at about 7000 BP (1975: 185) and revealed two stone tool assemblages separated by a depositional break which occurred between 3000 and 5000 years ago (ibid: 235). The upper industry consisted primarily of tula adzes, unifacial and bifacial points, and some edge-ground axes. The lower level contained primary flakes, rounded, domed, steeply trimmed, and concave scrapers, rounded cores or heavy core-scrapers and, of particular interest here, three slabs (apparently fallen from the shelter wall) which bore abraded grooves (ibid: 185; 188 plate 59). These slabs are bracketed by radio-carbon dates of 6,800 +/- 270 BP (ANU-60) and 4,920 +/- 100 BP (ANU-58) (ibid: 289).

The sites that Davidson and Mulvaney dug are relatively close to each other and provide the only published data for prehistoric assemblages on the eastern edge of the Victoria River valley. However, fifty-six years after Davidson's pioneering work, his excavations on Delemere station remain as the only ones carried out within the immense Victoria River valley, an area of over 80,000 square kilometres.

Ord River Sites

Three hundred kilometres west of Ingaladdi, in the Ord River Valley, Dortch (1977: 104-132) excavated several shelter deposits and sampled a number of open sites. At two sites -

Monsmont and Miriwun - occupation began in the Pleistocene, about 18,000 BP (ibid: 109). Compared to Mulvaney's and, especially, Davidson's published descriptions, Dortch provides a far more comprehensive account of his findings. This difference renders comparisons difficult. The Ord River assemblages exhibit some major differences from those at Willeroo and Delemere although how much this is the result of more detailed analysis or greater time depth is unclear. However, the basic division between an early and a late industry at about 3000 BP, as well as the appearance of unifacial and bifacial points at this time, is shared in both areas.

Because the Victoria River valley is effectively bracketed by the Ord River and Willeroo-Delemere regions, it is possible to predict that elements common to the stone industries of both areas will also occur in the Victoria River country. From my observations of surface scatters of artefacts, this certainly appears to be the case.

Field Observations

The forgoing description of Victoria River prehistory is of necessity generalised and tentative. However, recent archaeological remains are common throughout the region. Surface scatters of stone artefacts, sometimes associated with hearths, are the most common site type. Apart from these, the range of archaeological sites found in the region includes quarries for stone used to make artefacts and for minerals used in ritual contexts, rock shelters containing occupation deposits, human remains, or rock art (usually a combination of these), rock engravings on exposed stone pavements and a variety of stone arrangements.

Stone Industries

Since the introduction of cattle in the region in the 1880's, there has been severe degradation of the landscape (Maze 1945: 7-8). My own observations confirm the widespread effects of erosion due to the impact of cattle grazing; areas with only bare sub-soil

and dead trees are common, waterholes are silted and riverbanks are severely eroded.

The erosion of topsoil has proved a mixed blessing for archaeologists. Undoubtedly many archaeological sites have been damaged or destroyed, but at the same time untold millions of stone tools have been exposed which might otherwise have remained hidden. Without doubt, the densest concentrations of surface scatters of stone tools are found on eroded areas along watercourses, but isolated artefacts or larger scatters may be found almost anywhere that erosion has occurred (Plate 12). Indeed, debitage is so widely distributed that I have found it to be more the exception than the rule to find areas devoid of stone artefacts.

With the exception of the 'backed points' and grooved axes from the Ord River, described by Dortch (1977: 117, 121), stone tools resembling those described or illustrated by Davidson, Mulvaney, and Dortch occur throughout much of the Victoria River district. Readily identifiable tool types commonly seen on sites in the district include ground-edge (ungrooved) axes, a variety of scraper-adzes including 'tulas' and the diminutive 'thumb nail' type, upper and lower millstones, and a variety of points.

The millstones are of two kinds. In the upper Victoria River valley (from the desert fringe to about Pigeon Hole), they resemble those found throughout much of inland Australia (McCarthy 1967a: 55-56). These have an elongated grinding depression and are used primarily for grinding grass seeds (Plate 12). In the lower Victoria River country (from the coast to about Timber Creek), the grindstones have a circular depression, and are primarily used for pounding a variety of foods and other substances (Plate 13; see Peterson 1968; Lewis 1988a: 69-70 and Smith 1988 for a discussion of the functions of these different grindstones). Both types of grindstone are found in the middle Victoria River country, but those with elongated depressions are more common there than those with circular depressions.

The most common type of stone point is unifacially flaked. These range in size from specimens less than 2 centimetres to those up to 8 centimetres long. Classic Kimberley bifacial points, pressure-flaked and sometimes with serrated edges, are present only in small numbers. Whether these were traded into the region, as Davidson (1935: 168-70) states was the case for the Wardaman, is unknown, but the discovery of several trimmed artefacts that resemble the first stage in the process of manufacturing a Kimberley bifacial point suggests local manufacture (see Rainey 1973: 9).

Rock Shelters

Rock shelters are almost totally restricted to sandstone formations. They are most often formed through the action of differential weathering at the base of cliffs or outcrops although some consist of an overhang at the base of massive free-standing boulders. They range in size from those large enough for only one or two people to lie down in (Plate 14), to massive 'rooms' that could accommodate several family groups with ease (Plate 15).

Most of the shelters contain small numbers of stone flakes in a thin layer of sand, but occasionally much larger quantities of stone artefacts are visible on the surface of deposits which may be a metre or more in depth. As well as waste flakes, hammerstones, millstones, hearths, fragments of freshwater mussel shell and fragments of bone may be found on shelter floors. Human limb bones and skulls, some bearing traces of red ochre, are sometimes found in niches or on ledges in the walls of these shelters; there is no evident separation of shelters used for occupation from those used for the deposit of human remains. Most of the skulls I have seen have had the lower part removed, leaving only the cranium intact. The kernels of an unidentified fruit were associated with several bone caches. It is possible that these were deliberately placed with the bones, and if so they constitute the only observed grave goods.

Organic artefacts or artefacts with organic sections are rare. I have found a spearthrower, a coolamon, a resin-handled stone

knife, and two caches of sacred objects. Occasional pieces of glass, iron 'shovel-nose' or 'wire' spearheads, rusted billycans, and the remains of other European goods attest to the use of at least some of these shelters during the contact period.

Finally, the walls of almost all shelters are decorated with rock art. This may consist of paintings, or engravings, or both. Artworks are sometimes found on rocks and boulders lying on the shelter floors. Rock art, primarily pecked engravings, is also found on fully exposed rockfaces (eg Plate 16). This art is described in detail in Chapter 3.

Stone Arrangements

I have recorded a variety of stone arrangements within the Victoria River catchment. The most common type is the remains of hawk hunting hides. These were first recorded by members of Gregory's expedition at many locations throughout the Victoria River district (see Chapter 5). They consist of a low (one metre high) circular wall of rocks with an opening on one side (Plate 17). The hide was roofed with sticks and grass, a bait displayed on top and the surrounding grass was fired to attract birds of prey. As the birds tried to take the bait they were grabbed, pulled through the roof of the hide, and killed by the Aboriginal hunter (see Lewis 1988b). From Aboriginal accounts, the use of these hides appears to have ceased by the 1940's.

Another type of stone arrangement consists of low mounds or wall-like structures built within rock shelters. I recorded the first of these structures in 1984, in a deep shelter on Gordon Creek in the Victoria River valley. In 1988 and 1989, Howard McNickle (pers. comm.) located a considerable number of similar structures in shelters in the catchments of the East and West Baines Rivers (Plates 18-20).

In 1989 I visited twelve of the Baines Rivers structures and recorded another on Stirling Creek, a tributary of the Ord River (Plate 21). The structures consist of as few as two or three slabs leant together, to massive 'walls' or heaps of stones up to 6

metres long, 1.5 metre wide, and 1 metre high. Rock slabs in a number of these structures bear painted or scratched artworks or patches of red and yellow ochre (eg Figure 1). In one instance an ochre patch on a slab within one of the 'walls' is identical in colour to a rock painting on the shelter wall immediately above.

The only one of these 'walls' I have visited with an Aboriginal custodian is the one on Stirling Creek (Map 3). Jimmy Manngayari, who showed me this particular example, believed it to have been built by Europeans as a defence against attack by Aborigines. However, the large number of similar structures elsewhere, and the fact that some of them bear Aboriginal artworks, suggests that they are of Aboriginal manufacture. The one on Stirling Creek may have been used by Europeans for defence, as Jimmy suggested, but it is most unlikely to have been constructed by them for that purpose.

I have questioned several other elderly Aborigines about the 'walls' in the Baines River headwaters. These were people (male and female) who had lived for extended periods in the Baines River sandstone country, and who must have seen structures of this type. None of these people professed any knowledge of such stone 'walls', and none of the other people I asked about the arrangements could offer a confident explanation for their existence.

When I described the example on Gordon Creek to Alan Young who had camped in caves in the area, his only suggestion was that it might be a wind break, but in this particular instance the structure is located within a deep shelter where wind would not present a problem. I remain hopeful that further research may reveal more about these unusual arrangements.

Much less common than either hawk hunting hides or stone structures in rock shelters are standing stones. I have been shown five examples by Aborigines. They identified some as particular Dreaming beings, and some as body parts left by the Dreamings. These ranged from small (15 cm tall) individual stones to large post-like stones (up to 2 metres) supported at the base by several shorter rocks.

Another stone arrangement consisted of a heap of large waterworn rocks which Aboriginal custodians say are the eggs of Jimaruk, the Dreaming Water Python and Basedow (1925: plate 39) illustrates a 'U'-shaped arrangement from 'Victoria River' that I have not yet been able to relocate.

Several ethnographic accounts mention the existence of stone fish traps in the Victoria River valley (Baines 1857-58: 7; Forrest 1880: 29; Mathews 1901: 78), but these apparently no longer exist. They are described as a 'V'-shaped wall built across a stream, with the apex facing downstream. The apex formed a narrow channel which led into a basket from which the fish were unable to escape once they had entered. Elderly Aborigines still remember these traps being used and a photograph of one in the Victoria River 'near Wave Hill' was taken in 1933 (Schultz collection, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies).

Stone Quarries

A variety of quarries exist in the Victoria River catchment. Sources of silicified sandstone for the production of points, scrapers and other tools, are particularly common in the area west of the Victoria River and south of Gordon Creek. Passing through this area in January 1856, Gregory (1981: 126) noted that '...great quantities of broken stones and imperfect spear heads were noticed on the banks of ...[Fever]...Creek.' One major quarry site I recorded in this region was a source for large quartzite 'leilira' blades (Plate 22).

At a site on Gordon Creek several deep curved grooves have been pecked into the surface of an outcrop of laminated sandstone. It seems likely that creating such a groove was a means of quarrying grindstone blanks, but I have not yet been able to discuss this with local custodians.

In the Keep River valley, west of Victoria River, one site has been found where basalt appears to have been quarried for the

manufacture of stone axes. This is the only axe quarry I have yet located anywhere in the Antrim Plateau volcanics, although axe blanks and finished axes of basalt are relatively common in surface scatters throughout the Victoria, Keep and Ord River valleys. The apparent absence of such quarries in the Victoria River valley may best be explained by the extremely widespread occurrence there of basalt which was probably used opportunistically as the need arose.

Ochre Sources

I have recorded several sources of red and yellow ochre, but I have no evidence to suggest that these are still being used by Aborigines. At Yarralin I saw part of a cake of red ochre which had been traded in from a quarry site on Banka Banka Station, in Central Australia (Map 1). People said that red ochre from this quarry was 'the best'. Red ochre is still used regularly for ritual purposes and to decorate artefacts, and it is probable that trade is now the primary means by which this pigment is acquired. Several deposits of a white mineral (kaolin clay and calcium carbonate) used in 'love magic' are still being utilised by local Aborigines.

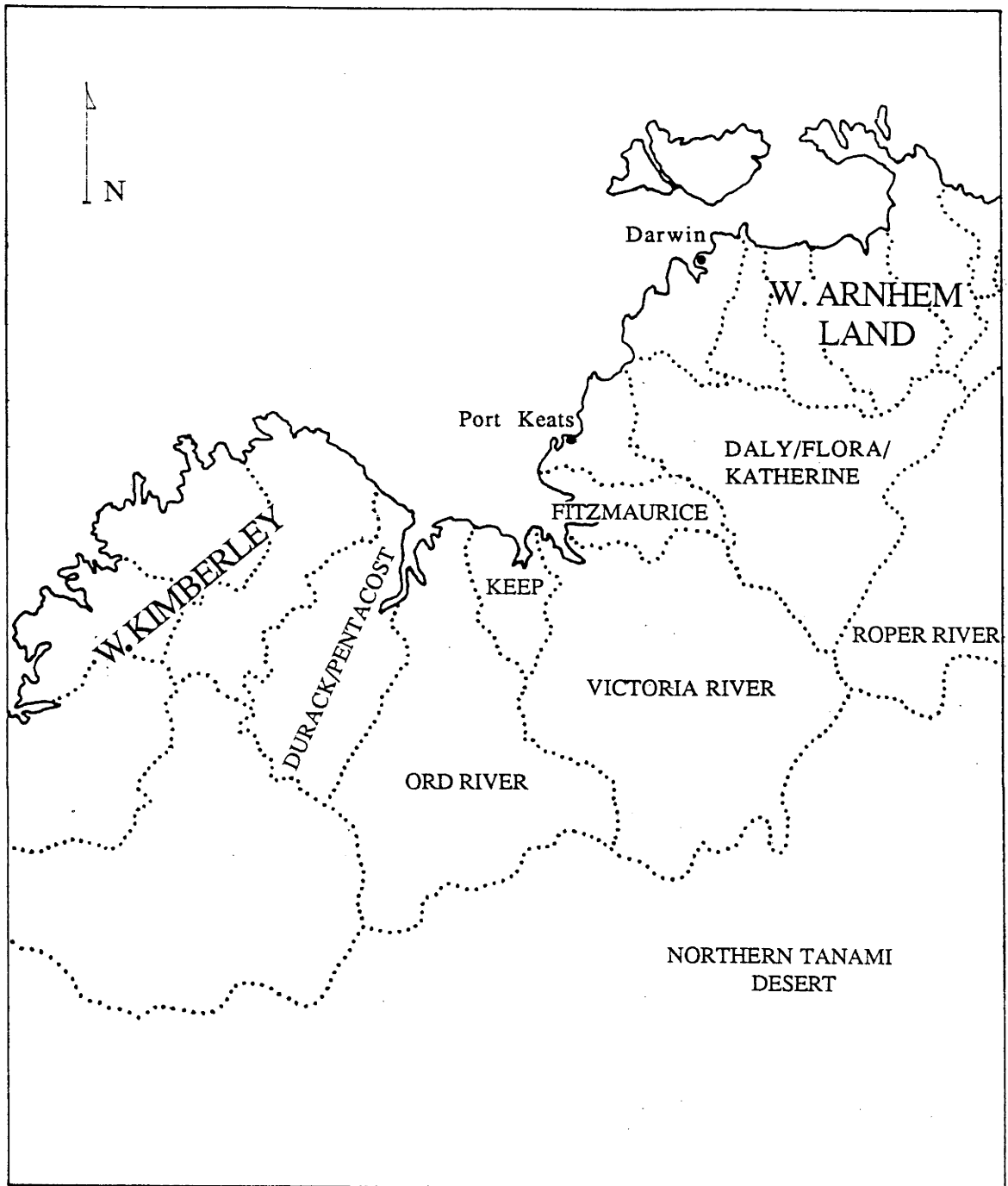
Finally, Aborigines have shown me two sources of calcite crystal which was used in rain-making rituals. One of these is located on Armstrong Creek, an eastern tributary of the Victoria River. The other source is west of the Victoria River valley, on the upper reaches of Stirling Creek. None of the sites from which minerals have been extracted - ochre, white clay, calcium carbonate, or calcite - were recognisable as archaeological sites.

Summary

Although only Davidson has carried out archaeological excavations in the Victoria River valley proper, the area is bracketed by work in the Ord River and Flora River catchments. My observations of surface scatters lead me to expect that similar patterns obtain in the Victoria River valley.

The art itself, which I will discuss in the next two chapters, offers few clues to its antiquity, although some examples are clearly very recent.

Quarries, stone arrangements of mythological significance, hawk hunting hides, fish traps, rock art, burial sites, and the widespread and common distribution of surface scatters all attest to Aboriginal use of the country in the past. The presence of items in shelters such as spearthrowers and billy cans show a continuity of use which in some select areas continues to the present (Chapter 5).



Map 4: North-west and north Australian catchment areas.

3 DESCRIPTIVE CLASSIFICATION

Introduction

The following description of Victoria River rock art is based on a sample of 306 sites, containing upwards of 4,500 motifs. Twenty one of these sites contain only pecked engravings; another thirty five contain both paintings and engravings. I have documented 118 sites in Bilinara country, 61 in Ngarinman country, 38 in Ngaliwurru country, 32 in Wardaman country, 16 in Jaminjung country, 18 in Gurindji country, 6 in Malngin country, 2 in Mudbura country, 2 in Karangpurru country, 10 in Kajerong country and 3 in Nungali country.

There are several reasons for the obvious disparity in site numbers from language area to language area. One reason is that the geology of some areas does not facilitate the formation of rock shelters, or in other ways is not conducive to the production of rock art. This situation applies in particular to Karangpurru country, and to a lesser degree to Mudbura and Malngin countries.

Another factor has to do with access to pastoral leases that now cover major sections of different language areas. All but one of these properties are controlled by European station managers or owners, many of whom deny access to researchers working with Aborigines or working on Aboriginal-related topics.

The primary reason for the large number of sites recorded in Bilinara and Ngarinman country compared to other areas concerns the ethnographic focus of this research. Because of my long-term relationship with Ngarinman and Bilinara people I knew that I would be able to gain Aboriginal permission to visit areas where I suspected rock art sites would be concentrated. I also knew that I had developed sufficient trust with Bilinara and Ngarinman people to be able to discuss with them any art that I recorded. The following description of the art is, therefore, based largely on Ngarinman and Bilinara art, but incorporates observations from sites throughout the Victoria River valley.

Victoria River Rock Art

The Victoria River valley contains a rich and complex body of rock engravings and paintings - probably one of the most varied in Australia. Techniques that have been used to produce the art include painting by hand or (rarely) brush, and engraving by pecking, abrading or scratching. Sometimes different combinations of these techniques have been used to produce one motif. These techniques, and combinations of techniques, are described below.

With the exception of abraded grooves most Victoria River rock art is figurative and the majority of figures are generalised; human figures and animals are often depicted without sexual characteristics and depictions of animals usually lack features or combinations of features that are unique to one species. Motifs that do have explicit sexual characteristics or species-specific features are executed in the same techniques and on the same rockfaces as motifs that lack these features. This indicates that it is not the medium or the technique that limits the amount of information encoded in the motifs; it would appear that many Aboriginal artists have produced these generalised artworks deliberately.

Identifying Motifs

While the generalised character of much Victoria River rock art makes precise identifications difficult or impossible for non-acculturated people, at a general level of identification the majority of motifs portrayed are recognisable by Europeans. Recognisable classes of motifs include humans, material culture items, plants, European contact items, and a wide range of animals including mammals, birds, fish and reptiles.

Generalised human or 'human-like' figures in both paintings and engravings are usually sufficiently realistic to be easily recognised as such by both Aborigines and Europeans. Among the paintings,

many of these figures have distinctive features, and some constitute recurring types. Most paintings and engravings of animal representations in Victoria River art can also be classed at a general level.

Shape

On the basis of shape alone, it is not difficult for Europeans to sort out various classes of animals to at least family level; snakes from birds, mammals from fish, and so on. Aboriginal and European identifications usually concur at this level. However several studies of rock art in other parts of Australia have concluded that in most instances shape alone is an unreliable guide to the species identity of faunal motifs; to arrive at a precise species identification, species-specific features must be present in the depiction, or cultural knowledge must be available (Rosenfeld 1982; Lewis 1986). Without species-specific details encoded in the art, or access to other cultural knowledge, it is generally impossible to attain precise identifications because usually more than one species from a particular genus is found in the region.

This is the case for most of Victoria River district rock art. For instance, a 'kangaroo' image could depict any one of at least six macropod species that have lived in the region in recent times. The same applies to depictions of fish, snakes, 'goannas', and in the most extreme case, birds.

Probably the only animal in Victoria River rock art that can consistently be identified to species level on the basis of shape alone is the echidna. This animal has a distinctive shape and only one species is found on the Australian mainland. Crocodile representations also stand a reasonable chance of being identified from their shape; the two species which occur in the region possess markedly different proportions of head and jaw. Although this difference could be rendered in an ambiguous manner, for the most part it is not. For most animal depictions in Victoria River rock art, identifications beyond the level that shape will

allow depends upon other information from the socio-cultural matrix of which the art is but one component.

Species-specific Details

While the majority of Victoria River animal representations are too generalised for identification beyond family level, some motifs do have sufficient detail encoded to identify a genus or even a species without recourse to other cultural knowledge. For example, Figure 2 has the distinctive bulbous beak-tip of a spoonbill, and may therefore be identified as one or the other of two spoonbills (genus *Platalea*) found in this region. Similarly, the birds in Plate 23 (painted) and Figure 3 (engraved) both have vestigial wings indicated, and these are found only on the emu (*Dromaius novaehollandiae*).

Problems the generalised nature of Victoria River rock art creates in identifying motifs apply both to painted and to engraved figures, but in other respects the two techniques vary. Therefore, in the following discussion I will deal with each broad category separately.

Paintings

Victoria River rock paintings include a wide variety of mammals, birds and fish, crocodiles, goannas, turtles, snakes, plants, material culture objects, European contact items, human figures engaged in many different activities, 'mythic beings' including animal-headed snakes, stencils of hands, feet, and material culture items, and positive prints of hands, 'grass' and thrown objects.

Generally speaking, subject matter ranges in size from 30 centimetres to life size, but paintings may be as small as 5 centimetres or, in the case of animal-headed snakes, as large as 11 metres. The colours used are black, white, and various shades of red and yellow. Paintings may be monochrome, bichrome or polychrome. No particular colour or combination of colours is

dominant in any part of the Victoria River valley. With the exception of a small number of possibly old monochrome red and monochrome black paintings (Chapter 4), particular colours do not appear to have been favoured at any point in time.

It is almost always the rule that more than one painting exists at each site. Galleries with twenty to thirty paintings are common; the largest I have recorded has several hundred individual paintings. Motifs are often painted directly onto the rock face, but superimposed paintings are also common, especially in the larger galleries (eg Plates 24-26). Superimposition usually does not obscure the earlier paintings to any great degree unless these are already very faded or weathered. Galleries where continuous superimpositioning events have largely or totally covered the parent rock are rarely encountered.

Temporal Sequence of Styles

The over-riding impression of Victoria River rock paintings is that most belong to one tradition or period of time when one set of artistic conventions was in vogue. This tradition includes paintings that depict cattle, horses and other subjects that date from European settlement. In spite of great diversity in the art, there are very few paintings that, by reason of superimpositioning, condition, content, perspective, colours or technique used, or style difference, appear to predate the most recent period of art.

A small number of motifs have attributes or are of subject matter that sets them apart from the vast majority of Victoria River paintings. Unusual attributes include fine-line painting technique, red ochre that appears to have bonded to the rock face, and the use of an unidentified black pigment. For convenience I refer to this constellation of motifs as 'older' paintings, but I emphasise that at this point there are no dates to confirm or refute this hypothesis.

'Older' Art ?

Among the few paintings that may be 'old' are a small number that I recorded in 1983. Some of these have features bearing an affinity to paintings restricted to particular periods of Arnhem Land Mimi art (Lewis 1984): weathered red ochre paintings of animals (Figures 4 and 5), humans (Figures 6 and 7), boomerang stencils and 'grass' or fibre prints (Figure 5). All of them appear to be bonded to the rockface upon which they are painted. The body area on one of the animals is filled with short dashes in the same manner as many Arnhem Land Mimi paintings (Figure 4). With respect to the 'grass' prints, previous to their discovery in the Victoria River valley they were known only from western Arnhem Land where they are believed to date from an early rock art period (see Lewis 1988a: 58-61).

All of these motifs were located in the northern part of the Victoria River valley, in Wardaman and Jaminjung country. In 1989 I recorded more apparently 'old' paintings at three sites to the west on Bullo River station (Kajerong country; Maps 2 and 3), and at four sites further to the south, in the head-waters of the West Baines River (western Ngarinman country; see Map 3).

Several of the Kajerong sites contain weathered dark red paintings which appear to have bonded with the rock face. In one gallery there are representations of what appear to be plants with bulbs or tubers (Figure 8), several human figures and two animal-headed beings of more or less anthropomorphic form (Plate 27, Figure 9), all in the same shade of red. One of the human figures has objects resembling yams or lily leaves attached to its legs and one of the animal-headed beings has a 'string' attached to one arm. In nearby galleries there are 'old'-looking representations of a mammal and birds (Figure 10), an anthropomorphic being (Figure 11), 'grass' prints and thrown object prints. The mammal, birds and anthropomorphic being are painted in lines too thin to have been applied by hand and therefore must have been applied by brush.

One of the sites in Ngarinman country contains superimposed and weathered figures, many of which appear to be painted in a

similar shade of red. Apart from an echidna, a goanna, snake-like motifs, and a plant with bulbs or tubers (Figure 12), the paintings include what appears to be a plant with flower and leaves, an extremely elongated lizard-like being which has double lines extending from wrists to tail, and an animal-headed being (Figure 13). The latter painting has two 'strings' extending from hand to foot on each side of its body, a leaf-shaped object attached to each wrist, and another leaf-shaped object near its face.

Another gallery has over two hundred and thirty positive prints of hands, as well as prints of 'grass', thrown objects (Plate 28), red stencils of hands and a white stencil of an unidentified oval object. Except for the white stencil, all of the art in this shelter is in red. Several other West Baines sites have thrown object prints or 'grass' prints. Like 'grass' prints, the thrown object prints of the type found at the Kajerong and Ngarinman sites were previously believed to be restricted to early periods of Arnhem Land rock art.

One of the Ngarinman sites with possibly old red art, and several other sites in the West Baines catchment, also have what appear to be old paintings in black pigment. At one site there are representations of what appear to be plants with tubers or bulbs, unidentified mammals, bird tracks, human and human-like figures, and three echidnas in side view (Plate 29, Figure 14). At another site there are two animal-headed beings, what appears to be a plant with tubers or bulbs, tuber or bulb-like objects, and human-like beings (Figure 15). Again the animal-headed beings have lines or 'strings' extending from hand (or shoulder) to foot. Most of the paintings at these two sites have lines too thin to have been applied by hand.

In some galleries in the West Baines catchment there are motifs that were painted in black originally, but in which much of the pigment has since turned green. I have not had samples of this pigment analysed, but it should be noted that in west Arnhem Land, black pigments with a greenish tinge were analysed and found to be charcoal discoloured through the effects of mildew on a binding agent (Brandl 1973: 106). None of the apparently old

black paintings in the West Baines catchment has a trace of green discolouration.

Most of the motifs in one panel of black paintings have been marked through being rubbed with a stone. Marking is particularly severe on the tubers/bulbs on three paintings of plants, and on two echidnas in the panel which have been almost obliterated (Plate 30, Figure 14). I have seen paintings in other Victoria River galleries that have been rubbed (eg Plate 31), but none so thoroughly as these. It is possible that the rubbing of paintings is a type of increase ritual.

A Possible Sequence

There are several reasons for suggesting that these paintings may predate the bulk of Victoria River painted art. Individually each reason is weak and inconclusive; combined, they are highly suggestive that the paintings are survivals from an earlier tradition.

The primary reason for suggesting that at least some of these paintings may belong to an earlier time period is their content. In a previous paper I noted the possible temporal concurrence between 'grass' prints and 'thrown object' prints in the Victoria River district and similar motifs in Arnhem Land (Lewis 1984: 60). I also noted that the painting technique of some Victoria River motifs - fine line brush strokes as opposed to applying paint by hand - also differentiates them from Victoria River paintings in general. These observations hold for much of the art described above.

A more compelling argument concerns paintings at two of the sites in the West Baines catchment and at one site in Kajerong country. At each of these sites there are paintings of animal-headed beings with 'strings', which, on the basis of identical colour used, are associated with plants that have tubers or bulbs. This association occurs in the black pigment art as well as the red pigment art, but does not exist among recent paintings. In fact, depictions of animal-headed beings are extremely rare

among recent Victoria River paintings and none of them have 'strings' attached. Depictions of what appear to be plants with bulbs or tubers are non-existent in recent Victoria River art. One motif that appears to represent a flowering plant is located at a Wardaman site in the Flora River catchment (Figure 16). It is painted in white lines apparently superimposed on traces of black pigment, and appears to be quite recent.

Another reason is their condition. All of the paintings exhibit features consistent with age. For example, all have sections completely faded and none have pigments forming a surface layer on the rockface. The red paintings, especially, appear to be bonded to the rock. In addition, many of the examples from Kajerong country are affected by the build-up of an unidentified white mineral.

The three echidnas in black pigment that have been severely abraded are painted in side view perspective. This is unlike any other painting (or engraving) of an echidna in the Victoria River valley although I have seen one recent example from the Keep River valley to the west (Plate 32). It is possible that in an earlier period the artistic conventions governing perspective were broader than at present and that these echidna representations are examples of this.

The colour of some of the motifs may also have a bearing on the question of chronology. Many of the motifs being considered here are red. Evidence from both the Kimberley and Arnhem land suggests that red ochre is the most long-lasting pigment. Furthermore, in his study of X-ray paintings in western Arnhem Land, Tacon (1987: 45) found that about 85% of early X-ray motifs were dark red in colour. This is in contrast with recent X-ray art where the red pigments used are often quite bright (pers. obs.), and suggests that with age, many red pigments tend to darken. In contrast with red pigments seen in most Victoria River paintings, the paintings of animal-headed beings, humans, and 'plants with bulbs or tubers' in the Kajerong site are very dark red. The other motifs in question are either faded red or black.

None of the old paintings in the Kajerong sites are in superimposition with any other art so their relationship to recent art in the area cannot be determined by assessment of painting sequence. A number of the old red and black motifs in the Ngarinman sites are in superimposition with other weathered red motifs, but it has not been possible to establish the sequence of these paintings with any certainty.

Two of the black paintings in one gallery have been superimposed by recent motifs. One, an animal-headed being, is superimposed by a painting of a bovine (Plate 33). Paintings of European livestock clearly date from the past one hundred years; this instance of superimposition reveals little about the temporal relationship of the two paintings other than that the black painting precedes what is obviously a very recent painting. The other black motif - an unidentified object partly surrounded by 'strings' - is superimposed by the leg of an elaborately decorated female figure holding a 'string' over her head (Plate 33). The female figure is in excellent condition and appears to be contemporary with an adjacent painting of a mounted horseman. Again, all that can be said is that the black painting precedes a figure that is probably very recent.

The Character of Victoria River Rock Paintings

My initial attempts to identify and define characteristics that distinguish Victoria River district rock paintings from rock art in neighbouring regions (Arnhem Land and the Kimberleys) resulted in a curious paradox. As a regional body of art the paintings appear to possess a distinctive character of their own. Yet individually, few if any paintings seem distinctive enough to characterise the region in the way that, for example, X-ray paintings are characteristic of central and western Arnhem Land, and Wandjina figures are characteristic of the west Kimberleys.

A low level of formal standardisation is a distinguishing feature of Victoria River rock art. There does, nevertheless, appear to be a somewhat intangible distinctiveness about the rock paintings of the area and I hope that the following description will clarify this

distinctiveness, as well as outlining the great variations in the art of the region. I will begin by examining the techniques employed in the creation of this art.

Painting Techniques

Apart from the small number of possibly old paintings described above, most Victoria River paintings appear to have had their pigments applied by hand in the form of a liquid or slurry. Indeed, in a number of examples, finger marks are still visible in the pigment and in one instance, fine grooves left by the whorl pattern on the finger tips are still visible

Occasionally additional decoration has been applied to a painting by blowing wet pigment from the mouth (Plates 33-37, Figure 17). This technique has also been used to make stencils of hands, feet and material culture items (Plate 38 Figures 18-20).

Dry pigment drawings have been created by using a piece of ochre as a crayon. Although uncommon, this technique has been used to create complete pictures as well as to add details to wet pigment art.

Degree of Elaboration

The most basic figures are monochrome silhouettes with minimal extra detail. At this level of simplicity, paintings of animals or humans include only head, torso, limbs (fins, wings), and, if an animal, a tail. Details such as genitalia, hands, facial features, feet or paws may be omitted (eg Plates 39, 40, Figures 21, 22).

A more complex level of elaboration is discernible with the addition of one or more of the following: eyes, genitals/anus, hands (on humans) or paws (on animals), or an outline in either a contrasting colour or a contrasting shade of the colour used for the base silhouette (Plates 41-48, Figures 23-33). Sometimes a double outline of two colours may be applied although such outlines are uncommon and tend to be very crudely applied. The

outline is usually a continuous band of pigment (eg see Plates 24, 43, Figures 25-33) but is sometimes 'broken' or 'dotted' (Plates 47, 48, Figures 34-36).

One of the most common colour schemes is a red silhouette with a white outline. Figures consisting of a base silhouette with a continuous, broken or dotted outline and minimal additional features (eyes, genitalia/anus) in a contrasting colour occur throughout the Victoria River valley, and beyond (eg Plates 24, 45-49 Figures 25-33, 35-44; for occurrences elsewhere see Crawford 1968: 116; Walsh 1988: emus in plates 180, large Quinkan figure in plate 250). Further elaborations may be the addition of 'joint' lines or other dividing lines at points on the limbs or body of anthropomorphs, mammals, reptiles, birds or fish (see Plates 36, 51-56, Figures 34-36, 40-41).

In the most highly elaborated examples paintings may be in three or four colours, including different shades of the one hue. As well as the 'joint' marks mentioned above, the paintings of humans and animals may have sections of the body decorated with parallel stripes, dots, dashes, or splashes of pigment blown from the mouth (eg Plates 25, 35, 57-59, Figure 17). Decoration of this type may also be applied to depictions of material culture items (eg Plate 36).

Perspective and Conventions of Style

From a western point of view, most Victoria River rock paintings do not appear to be arranged into composed scenes, but there are some notable exceptions to this. There are, for example, fishing and hunting 'scenes' (Figures 45-47). Many paintings of both animals and humans or human-like beings have a stiff pose; some human figures express considerable movement, particularly by the positioning of their limbs (cf Plate 35 and Figure 48 with Plate 45 and Figures 49, 50).

Other aspects of perspective can vary considerably from one figure to another, or from one class of subject matter to another. Because there are certain consistencies in the perspective used

to portray particular types of animals, and in the way human or human-like figures are depicted, I will discuss animals and 'human' beings separately.

Animals

The perspective applied to Victoria River paintings of animals varies according to the particular subject matter being portrayed. Some motifs are highly conventionalised while others are subject to greater variability. For example, crocodiles, turtles and lizards are invariably depicted as though viewed from above (eg Plates 31, 44, Figures 17, 51) as are almost all echidnas (eg Plate 48, 51, Figure 51), the exceptions being two examples from a gallery in the West Baines River head-waters in Ngarinman country (Plate 30, Figure 14).

Mammals and fish are always shown in profile (eg Plates 34, 37, 53 and Figures 21, 28-31). Similarly, birds are usually drawn in profile as though roosting or standing rather than in flight (eg Plates 23, 51-52, Figures 2, 24, 32, 34, 36) although I have seen two exceptions (eg see Figure 10).

Snakes are usually depicted with the head shown as though seen from above and the body depicted ambiguously in what could be side or plan view (eg Figures 27, 52-54). A few snake representations are depicted as spirals and are therefore clearly in 'plan' view perspective (eg Figure 55). Animal-headed snakes (Rainbow snakes) may also be depicted in this ambiguous perspective where the body could be viewed from either above or the side while the head is in side view; some have their body depicted tightly coiled in 'concertina' fashion (eg Figures 56, 57). There are reports of Rainbow snake depictions in the Baines River head-waters that are painted as though the head is facing the viewer (Grahame Walsh pers. comm.).

Very few Victoria River paintings show any kind of internal anatomical feature. In Wardaman country, at least two fish have their backbone depicted (Figure 58; see Mulvaney 1975: 273, plate 88). In the Victoria River valley proper, the only paintings I

have seen which *may* have internal features indicated are a series of goannas at a site in Bilinara country (see Plate 60, Figures 58, 59), and two human figures, also in Bilinara country (Figure 49).

Humans

Of the various motifs in Victoria River art, human figures exhibit the greatest diversity in colour scheme, draughting skill, perspective, elaboration and form. Human figures are most frequently depicted as though standing stiffly upright; some seem to be depicted running or dancing (eg Plate 45, Figures 22, 49, 50). Depictions of figures engaged in sexual intercourse are also present (eg Plate 61, Figures 60-62) and occasionally figures are depicted hunting, fishing, or brandishing weapons (Plates 25, 36, 55, 62, Figures 45-47, 65).

The perspective applied to such figures ranges from full frontal view to side view. Some incorporate both aspects to varying degrees, that is, they are portrayed in 'twisted' perspective (eg Plates 63, 64, Figures 44, 62-64). Figures may be very bulky or very thin (cf Figure 48 with Figure 26). The limbs may be shown in almost every position normally attainable by human beings and sometimes in positions that are not (see Plate 45, Figure 25). Hands and feet, where details of the fingers or toes are provided, are twisted toward the viewer as though the soles and the palms are visible (Plates 35, 36, 63, Figures 26, 41, 50). The number of digits, where shown, and the physical proportions of body and limbs, are variable.

Side View Perspective of Humans

Human figures depicted in profile or side view commonly have a bulky body when compared with front view figures. They are also often drawn with the knees bent, the body angled forward, and the arms bent upwards from the elbow to create a crouching or stooping appearance (eg Plates 62, 65, and Figures 44, 47, 66). An interesting feature of this category of human figure is the depiction of a facial profile or, more precisely, a long nose

(Figures 44, 62-64). I have recorded such figures in Bilinara, Ngarinman, Kajerong and Bilinara country. A figure of this type was recorded by Thomas Baines on Depot Creek (probably Bilinara country) in 1855 (see Plate 2).

Human (or anthropomorphic) figures in side view are common in Arnhem Land and Pilbara rock art (eg Brandl 1973: 22, 23, 37, 80a-c; Wright 1968: figures 9, 16, 142-156) and in early Kimberley art (Crawford 1968: figure 66, 68, 71, 78), but is an uncommon form of perspective in Aboriginal rock art elsewhere in Australia (for examples see McCarthy 1976: plates 4, 8). The depiction of facial features in profile is also common in certain styles of Arnhem Land art (eg Brandl 1973: figures 21-23, 179) and in Pilbara art (Wright 1968: figures 16, 145, 152), but is uncommon elsewhere in Australian Aboriginal rock art.

Distorted Humans

This category consists of figures that exhibit varying degrees of physical 'deformity' and is one of the most readily identifiable. The distinguishing characteristics are the depiction of the limbs curved or bent at unnatural angles and/or of unequal length, often with the hands and/or feet disproportionately large. Joints in the limbs are commonly shown as swollen lumps and lumps may be seen in the body (see Plate 66, Figures 25, 50, 67-75). Genitalia may be of exaggerated size.

The Human Face

In human or anthropomorphic figures, a great many have faces that are completely featureless (eg Figures 22, 23, 25, 26, 40, 50, 60, 69, 71). Where details have been added, the most common treatment of the face is to depict only the eyes (eg Plates 25, 55, 63, Figures 35, 42, 66, 68, 70). Some examples possess eyes and nose (eg Plate 57, Figure 76), and a few are shown with eyes, nose and mouth (Plate 67). The mouth, in particular, is rarely depicted in Aboriginal rock art. I have recorded a number of figures that have prominent projections

hanging from each side of the lower part of the head (Plates 68, 69, Figure 76). Such figures occur in Nungali country near the Victoria River Crossing, in Bilinara country on Gordon Creek, and in Ngarinman country on the Wickham River. Because of this feature these figures are reminiscent of certain of the Quinkan figures from Cape York Peninsula, but there is no evidence for a link between the two regions (cf Figure 76 with Trezise 1971: 131, figure 7 top right).

Regional Differences

With the limited samples I have from language areas other than Bilinara country and Ngarinman country, it is difficult to make firm statements for the whole of the Victoria River valley. One apparent pattern that is likely to be valid concerns differences in the range of subject matter portrayed in different environmental zones.

The most clear-cut difference is the existence of estuarine species in areas which abut or are close to the tidal reaches of the Victoria River, and their absence further inland. For example, I have recorded depictions of saltwater crocodiles in Jaminjung country (Plates 70, 71), sawfish in Jaminjung and Nungali country (eg Figure 77) and stingrays in Jaminjung, Wardaman, Nungali and Western Ngarinman country (eg Plate 72). None of these species are portrayed further inland. Similarly, in the near-coastal areas there are depictions of freshwater long-necked turtles (Figure 78); further inland only short-necked turtles are portrayed (eg Figures 51, 57).

The other way that the art may exhibit spatial variation - and I use 'may' advisedly - is through differences in the relative frequency of occurrence of figures with decorative elaboration. In terms of elaboration, there is of course a gradient from the most basic treatment to the most elaborate, and it is therefore difficult to classify figures on the basis of degrees of elaboration. In this context I define as 'elaborate' all figures that, in addition to the basic silhouette and outline, have internal divisions that have been decorated.

Bearing in mind the limitations of my sample, and the admittedly somewhat arbitrary criteria used in classifying motifs on the basis of degree of elaboration, it appears that elaborate figures become less common with distance inland. Different frequencies of elaboration are particularly apparent in comparing Wardaman rock art with rock art in Bilinara or Ngarinman country. In Wardaman country at least 7% of motifs can be classified as highly elaborate compared with, at most, 2 to 3% of Bilinara and Ngarinman art. Many of the Wardaman figures also appear to be more highly elaborated than elsewhere (cf Walsh 1988: plates 234, 239, 242-43 with my Plates 25, 57, 59, 73 and Figure 79). However, I have already pointed out that in relation to other Victoria River social groups the Wardaman are culturally anomalous in a number of other ways.

Unfortunately my samples from other coastal or near-coastal groups are too small for meaningful results to be obtained; more sites need to be recorded. Comparisons are further made difficult in that the two sites in Bilinara country with the most elaborate paintings are both restricted to men, and cannot be published. At this time it is not clear whether frequency of elaboration is best correlated with a coastal-inland axis or with a culture area cline.

Engravings

Rock engravings occur throughout the Victoria River valley, and beyond. Apart from random patterns of grooves or pits, most of the engravings are figurative. Depictions of macropods are common; other motifs include echidnas, unidentified mammals, birds, crocodiles, goannas, turtles, catfish, snake-like motifs, human figures, boomerangs and boomerang-like crescents, contact items, and animal, bird and human tracks. A variety of techniques have been used to produce this body of engraved art, and there are differences in the subject matter according to particular techniques. These are discussed below.

Techniques

Engravings in the Victoria River region have been produced in abraded, scratched or incised, and pecked techniques. These techniques have been used throughout the region, but apart from abraded grooves, which are ubiquitous, distribution is patchy. In Wardaman language area elaborate images have been created by combining abraded grooves into figurative motifs (Figure 80). Pecked art appears to be more common in the central and southern parts of the Victoria River valley than in the north. Scratched art is reasonably common, but is less noticeable than art produced by other techniques and is easily overlooked. The technique is really a variant of abrading, but for convenience it will be dealt with separately.

Abraded Art

Abraded art is produced either by dragging a hard object back and forth between two points on a rock face to produce a groove, or by twisting it back and forth at one point on the rockface to produce a pit. Abraded grooves are occasionally arranged to form 'bird tracks', but the most common abraded art consists of randomly placed pits or rows of grooves that do not form any obvious design. Exceptions to this 'rule' occur predominantly in the Wardaman language area where there are outcrops of particularly soft sandstone, and the technique of abrading has been used to produce various designs including representations of animal and human tracks, crescent shapes, human figures (Figure 80), and boats (see Plates 74, 75; Mountford and Brandl 1968: 688, figure 9). Most art in this technique is of the order of 30 to 100 mm in depth. In Wardaman country I have seen abraded bird tracks 2 cm deep and one 'groove' - a series of superimposed cuts forming one large lens-shaped depression - is 7 cm deep.

Abraded grooves and pits form a high proportion of the art in Jasper Gorge and adjacent areas of the Stokes Range, in Ngaliwurru language area (see Map 3). This concentration has probably come about because of the particular geology of the area.

The sandstone making up the shelters in Jasper Gorge is highly fractured, blocky, and unstable. It does not form 'canvases' suitable for large paintings or extensive painted galleries, but numerous large slabs of sandstone in the shelters are soft enough to be easily worked with the abrading technique. Apart from abraded grooves and pits, at one site there is a small abraded anthropomorphic figure (Figure 81) and at another a series of macropod tracks, 'bird tracks' and parallel crescents.

A variation of the 'standard' abrading technique is to rub the rockface with a blunt stone to bruise the surface. This creates a degree of colour contrast, and produces an image which has no discernible depth. This variant of the abrading technique is relatively uncommon, possibly because the damage to the rockface is so minimal that within a short time the surface repatinates. Almost every example that I have seen has been of such poor contrast with the surrounding rock that it has been impossible to obtain a clear photograph.

At two sites on Gordon Creek the technique has been used to create representations of emu-like birds (Plate 76; see Lewis and Rose 1988: 24, figure 5), and on the West Baines River there is a mounted horseman depicted in this way. Most of the images thus produced are crudely executed and located low down on shelter walls or on boulders within shelters; they give the impression of having been made by children.

Scratched or Incised Art

The technique used to produce this type of art is to repeatedly drag a very sharp object back and forth across the rock surface between slightly different points at each stroke. This creates a mass of fine scratches which reveal the colour of the sub-surface material. The process is continued across the rock face until the desired image is produced. It is a casual technique and produces art with quite a different appearance from the 'standard' abrading technique.

In the West Baines River catchment the technique has been used to produce images of snakes (Figure 1), humans, 'lizards' (Figure 82) and people on horseback. On the upper Wickham River the technique has been used to produce a rough outline of an animal-headed snake. The most elaborate example I have seen is in a sandstone gorge on Kaiser Creek, a tributary of Gordon Creek. There, a panel of twenty-five bird-like motifs and human figures with tall headdress have been scratched across a rockface over four and a half metres long (see Plate 77). The original rock surface is a dark red-brown; beneath the surface it is a light grey colour. The figures average half a metre tall and stand out so well against the original rock that they are visible from the opposite side of the gorge.

Pecked Art

Engravings produced by the pecking technique occur in sandstone areas throughout the Victoria River district. To date I have recorded fifty six sites where these engravings occur. Many of these sites are rock shelters which also contain paintings although the largest concentrations of pecked art are in open sites without paintings. The vast majority of pecked engravings are figurative. Many motifs are so weathered that they cannot now be identified.

The range of subject matter in the pecked art is more limited than among the paintings. Identifiable motifs include humans, macropods, generalised mammals, crocodiles, goannas, birds (including emu, cockatoo and bustard), boomerang-like crescents, turtles, echidnas, fish, snake-like figures, unidentifiable animals, and bird, human and animal tracks (see Plates 78-89 and Figures 3, 83-107). These motifs range in size from animal tracks 4 centimetres long, to a snake-like motif five metres long. Animal and human figures often approximate life-size, but may vary significantly. For instance, one turtle engraving I recorded is 125 centimetres across the back while human figures may be as small as 15 centimetres.

Motifs that do not appear to be figurative include meandering lines, pits, circles, and oval-shaped objects with bars (Figure 107). Bearing in mind their weathered condition, generalised style, and the small total number of sites with pecked engravings relative to sites with paintings, notable omissions from the range of pecked motifs include 'distorted' human figures, animal-headed snakes, and dingos.

Some of the figures are outlines (eg Plates 81, 83, Figures 83, 86, 89, 96, 102, 103, 107), some fully pecked (Plates 79, 85, 86, Figures 87, 98, 100, 101), and some are fully pecked silhouettes with a distinctly engraved outline (Plate 78, 87, 88, Figures 88, 93). Others have a pecked outline with part of the interior pecked (eg Plates 84, 88, Figures 84, 85, 90, 101, 105). Outline engravings of animals may have a line across the neck, chest, 'waist' or tail (eg Plate 81, Figures 92-94, 99). In the Victoria River valley I have seen no engravings that have internal features portrayed. In the Flora/Daly River catchment, in Wardaman country, a large human female figure has a foetus depicted (Lewis and McCausland 1987: 72, plate 3).

In Bilinara country engraved macropods from a number of sites have their head tilted back so that the line forming the throat and abdomen is relatively straight (eg Plate 88, Figures 92, 94). This stance is not a characteristic of paintings of macropods. My sample from other language areas is much too limited to indicate whether this feature is restricted to engravings in Bilinara country or is more widespread.

The perspectives employed are similar to those applied to the paintings, as described above. Mammals and birds are depicted in side-view (eg Plates 81-84, 86, 88, Figures 90-98, 101, 106), while crocodiles, goanna, turtles and echidnas are depicted as though viewed from above (eg Figures 99-101). Fish are either completely in side view or, in the case of catfish, have the head in plan view and the body in side view (eg Figure 102).

Human figures are usually depicted in frontal view (eg Plates 78, 79, 87, Figures 83-87, 90, 91) although side view figures also occur (Figures 88, 89). One of the side view figures has a 'nose'

depicted (Figure 87). Where hands, paws and feet are indicated they are often 'twisted' to be visible in the manner of tracks. Engravings of macropods, some unidentified mammals and human figures in side view sometimes have only one arm and one leg depicted (eg Plates 83, 88, Figures 88, 89, 96-98). This feature may be a strategy of the artist to reduce the amount of labour needed to produce the engravings.

Pecked engravings are often found superimposed, but in all instances I have seen the figures involved are equally patinated (and frequently highly weathered) and no sequence can be determined (eg Plates 82, 88).

Combinations of Painting and Engraving Techniques

The techniques described in this chapter - painting, abrading, 'scratching', rubbing, and pecking - may be combined in various ways in the one motif. For example, pecked engravings are often found partially or totally abraded (eg Figure 95). At sites in the Wardaman and Ngarinman language areas there are several pecked engravings which have been outlined with white pigment (Plates 51, 89; see Lewis and McCausland 1987: 72, plate 3). Similarly, paintings are occasionally found that have been scratched (eg Plate 61) or rubbed (eg Plates 29, 28, 31). In such cases it appears that paintings have been scratched or rubbed some time after they were executed, apparently for ritual purposes.

Paintings sometimes have abraded sections incorporated within the design (Plate 90). In some cases the abraded component appears to cut through the pigment and may have been added to the painting some time after it was created. In other examples, the abraded areas have been painted over, and it cannot be determined whether they were made before any pigment was applied or if they were cut into an existing painting which was then repainted.

The most common combination of abrading and painting is for a human painted figure to have an abraded groove in the genital

area (eg Plate 90). I have a few examples of this in Bilinara, Ngaliwurru and Nungali country, but most are found in Wardaman country.

The most elaborate examples are found in Wardaman country. For instance, one small detailed abraded human figure with a large genital groove (Figure 80) has been completely covered by a painting of a much larger human figure (Plate 91). The most impressive example I have seen is a painted figure over 3 metres tall that has a deep abraded groove in its 'genital' area as well as abraded pits forming eyes and nostrils, a groove forming the mouth, and abraded lines radiating from its head. The radiating lines have been highlighted with stripes of red, white and yellow pigment.

Summary

The rock art of the Victoria River valley is rich, complex, and in terms of techniques used to produce the art, is one of the most varied bodies of rock art in Australia. With the exception of most of the art produced by the abrading technique, Victoria River rock art is predominantly figurative.

Victoria River rock paintings cover a wide range of subject matter and vary considerably in size, colour combinations, form, perspective, and degree of elaboration of individual figures. To some degree, content reflects differences in regional ecology. There may be an increasing frequency of elaboration of figures as one moves from the inland to the coast, but more data is needed before this proposition can be tested. However, rock art in Wardaman country is more frequently and often more extensively elaborated than in other areas of the Victoria River valley.

The vast majority of paintings appear to belong to a single artistic tradition which was still being practiced after European settlement. A small number of paintings exist which, on grounds of subject matter, style, colours used, and general condition, do not appear to be part of the recent tradition. These include positive prints of 'grass' and 'thrown objects', animals and human

figures that resemble certain styles of early Arnhem Land art, and paintings of animal-headed beings associated with what appear to be plants with tubers or bulbs, and, in one case, a flower. Although it cannot be proven that they predate the majority of paintings, they clearly form a separate category of art.

In terms of perspective, many engraved figures are highly similar to painted examples of the same subject. One distinctive feature common to both techniques is the use of side-view perspective for human figures. Compared with the paintings, there is a reduced range of subject matter among the pecked engravings. Notable omissions from the repertoire of pecked motifs are 'distorted' human figures, animal-headed snakes, and dingos or dog-like animals. The engravings are also more restricted in size, form, content, and elaboration. One feature that appears to be unique to pecked engravings of some macropods is the angle of the head relative to the body.

4 DATING ROCK ART

Visual Assessment

The highly weathered condition of many paintings and engravings throughout the continent has led some researchers to believe them to be quite ancient; often many thousands of years are claimed or inferred (eg Chaloupka 1984; Trezise 1971). However, consideration of physical condition alone is of little use in any attempt even roughly to estimate the absolute age of rock art.

For example, claims for great antiquity have often been made for pecked engravings, particularly the so-called 'Panaramittee' style (eg: Edwards 1971: 359-64; Maynard 1979: 84, 93-95). However, at two sites in Central Australia, the condition of European names engraved over fifty years ago is now identical in appearance to 'Panaramittee style' pecked engravings nearby which give the usual impression of great age (R. Kimber pers. comm.; see also McCarthy 1967b: 32 for a similar observation in the Sydney-Hawkesbury area).

Direct Dating

In her comprehensive summary of rock art conservation in Australia, Rosenfeld states that:

The dating of rock art remains a very difficult process. No chronological tests are known which can be applied to the pigments or to the patina on engravings. (Rosenfeld 1985: 11)

Since those words were written significant developments have occurred. Until recently radio-carbon tests to determine the age of any organic component in pigment art entailed major damage to or total destruction of the painting. In the only reported attempt I have discovered, the date obtained for an American Indian rock painting was 'from 100 to 2000 years', an

unacceptable margin of error (Grant 1965: 93, cited in Brandl 1973: 171).

Developments in the use of Accelerator Mass Spectrometry now enable dating of organic components in minute amounts of pigment or other materials, and this technique has recently been tried in Australia. Samples from a hand stencil at Judds Cavern in Tasmania returned a date of about 10,000 BP, and samples from 'fragmentary panels of weathered dark red pigment' at Laurie Creek, in the Northern Territory, have been dated to about 20,000 BP (Loy *et al* 1990).

While the results achieved are extremely encouraging, dating of rock paintings with this technique is still in its infancy. Obviously, this method can only be used if there *is* an organic component in the pigment, and even when organic compounds can be detected it may be difficult to determine whether they were part of the original pigment, derived from other sources, or contaminated with younger material. The technique will require further testing before widespread sampling is undertaken.

Rock engravings, by the extractive nature of the technique, do not incorporate an organic component in the process of their execution, and are therefore not amenable to direct dating. There is, however, a variety of methods for indirect dating of both rock engravings and paintings.

Indirect Dating

In the absence of conclusive direct dating, researchers must rely on indirect dating, and this is possible only in favoured circumstances. In rare instances, mineral coatings that have accumulated on the surface of rock art have the potential for radio-carbon or other forms of dating. For example, Dragovich (1986) reports a date of about 10,000 BP for calcium carbonate which covers a patinated 'Panaramittee style' engraving at Sturts Meadows in South Australia, and Watchman is investigating a variety of mineral skins that cover paintings and engravings in various parts of the continent (Alan Watchman, pers. comm.).

More recently, Nobbs and Dorn (1988) have measured the '...radio-carbon content and changes in the cation-ratio (CR) of (calcium+potassium)/titanium' in the 'rock varnish' on pecked motifs from the Olary region of South Australia. They claim that the oldest of these engravings are 31,600 years old. Although some researchers seem willing to accept the cation-ratio dating technique more or less as it stands (eg Clegg 1988: 139-141; Dragovich 1988: 141), others advise caution (eg Reneau and Harrington 1988: 141-142; Clarke 1989: 63-65; Watchman 1989a: 65-66 and 1989b: 246-247). This is a new technique and further testing is advisable before its reliability can be accepted.

The discovery of rock art buried in datable archaeological deposits provides another means of indirect dating, and is extremely valuable in providing a minimum age for art (see Rosenfeld *et al.* 1981; Lorblanchet 1983; Wendt 1976; Deakin *et al.* 1976). Unfortunately, such discoveries are a rare occurrence. In Australia, paintings have not been recovered from datable deposits. However, at Dampier in Western Australia engraved rocks have been found covered by shell midden deposit about 3,800 years old (Lorblanchet 1983: 182) and a radio-carbon date of about BP 13,000 years has been obtained for occupation deposits covering a panel of pecked engravings in south-east Cape York (Rosenfeld *et al.* 1981: 33).

The dates obtained by Rosenfeld *et al.*, and by Dragovich (1986), may be seen to support the view that some pecked engravings belong to a very early tradition, but extrapolation of such dates to sites elsewhere is problematic.

At present the most common form of indirect dating is the correlation of subject matter in the art with historical, archaeological, ethnographic, ecological or geomorphological data (eg see Brandl 1973: 2; Crawford 1968: 74-80, 89-90; Lewis 1988a; Chaloupka 1984: 15; Lorblanchet 1983). In some instances this method may allow absolute dating; more often it is only possible to place the art within a broad time period, or to provide a minimum or a maximum age. In any case, this type of dating depends upon sufficient detail being present in the art for

reliable identifications to be made. In many areas the art is too generalised for this to be done.

Relative Dating

Another method for dating rock art is relative dating: placing styles of art or particular motifs in chronological order. There are a number of ways that this can be done, ranging from the study of superimpositioning, to noting the degree of patination or mineral build-up on particular styles compared with other styles at the same site or in the same area, and to identifying material culture items or extinct faunal species limited to a particular art style or styles. If the age of one style can be determined, either directly or indirectly, then other styles will be either older or younger than that style. If it is not possible directly or indirectly to date any part of a sequence of styles, then all that a relative chronology will demonstrate is that one style is older than another, and so on, in a particular order.

Correlating motifs with other data of known age is more difficult with engravings than with paintings. In areas where engravings are figurative they usually have a more limited range of subject matter than that found in painted art, and by the very nature of the technique they seldom have the degree of detail evident in many paintings. Both factors reduce the potential for identifying individual motifs and then correlating them with other data of known age. It can also be more difficult to determine the sequence of superimposed engravings and place them in a relative chronology than it is with painted art.

On the other hand, engravings are often more resistant to the effects of weathering and may survive for much greater lengths of time, or in a greater range of conditions, than paintings. For instance, there is a much greater chance that engravings, rather than paintings, will survive burial in the ground or in archaeological deposits.

Dating Victoria River Rock Art

In the Victoria River region, engravings and paintings coexist. With the exception of abraded engravings, both traditions are largely figurative, and the possibility exists of relating one technique to the other. Any evidence for the age of one technique may provide indirect evidence for the age of the other, and may enable the development of a chronology incorporating both techniques. In the following discussion of the dating of Victoria River rock art, I first discuss the paintings and engravings separately, and then attempt to establish their chronological relationship.

The Prehistory of Victoria River Paintings

Theoretically, in the Victoria River district the *practice* of rock painting has Pleistocene antecedents. Evidence in support of this view derives from rock art research and archaeological excavations in Arnhem Land and the Kimberleys. In the Kimberleys, ochre has been in use since Pleistocene times (Dortch 1977: 121); in Arnhem Land, ochre use is documented to perhaps 50,000 years ago (Roberts *et al* 1990). Because Arnhem Land and the Kimberleys effectively bracket the Victoria River district, it is a reasonable assumption that ochre was being used in the Victoria River region during the same period.

While there is no proof that rock paintings were being produced in Arnhem Land or the Kimberleys 18-20,000 years ago, few archaeologists would now doubt that the earlier style of Arnhem Land Mimi art is well over 5000 and possibly more than 10,000 years old (see Lewis 1988a). In my own work I have taken a conservative approach; I find that the earliest identifiable art period appears to have developed during the Pleistocene. The similarity of the early Arnhem Land Mimi styles to paintings in the Kimberley has led a number of researchers to suggest former cultural continuity between the two areas (Crawford 1968: 82; Chaloupka 1984: 55; Lewis 1988a: 84-85, 93-94, 109-111).

In a recently published study of Arnhem Land art (Lewis 1988a) I interpreted this similarity as a response to the arid conditions of the late Pleistocene, conditions which according to John Chappell (pers. comm.) prevailed until at least 10,000 BP. I suggested that because of the unpredictable environmental conditions and low carrying capacity of the land, population density was low and groups sought to extend and ramify their social networks (cf Myers 1986; Yengoyan 1976). An emphasis on cultural similarity, achieved through a regional information network, produced a similar art style from Arnhem Land to the Kimberleys.

The postulated late Pleistocene cultural connection between Arnhem Land and the Kimberleys suggests that paintings similar to those surviving in Arnhem Land and the Kimberleys were once painted in the intervening area, viz the Victoria River valley. This supposition finds some tenuous support with the paintings I described in Chapter 3, some of which appear to be related to certain styles of Arnhem Land Mimi art (Figures 4-7, 10, 11; see Lewis 1984). The fact that these Mimi-type paintings are rare, and apparently limited to the northern limits of the Victoria River district, suggests either that Mimi-type art was produced only in that area, or that such art has been preserved only in that area. The evidence is strongly in favour of the latter hypothesis.

The long-term survival of rock paintings is known to depend on a variety of factors. These are:

- 1) The chemical and physical properties of both the pigment and the rock face, and the degree of bonding between them.
- 2) The physical stability of the rock face.
- 3) The development of silica coatings over the art.
- 4) The degree of protection from damage by animals, plants, and climatic factors, particularly water flow.

For maximum preservation, a fine-grained pigment (principally the form of iron oxide known as haematite) must penetrate a hard, stable rock base, preferably in a well protected situation, and then become chemically bonded and/or covered over with

silica (see Brandl 1973: 3; Hughes and Watchman 1983: 78; Rosenfeld 1985: 48). In west Arnhem Land such optimal conditions are commonly achieved on the most siliceous sandstones (orthoquartzites, Hughes and Watchman 1983: 78). Likewise, in the north-west Kimberley early red ochre art survives on highly siliceous sandstones (Clarke 1978: 54, 56-57). It is worth noting that geological reports for the Victoria River district commonly refer to various types of quartz sandstone, but orthoquartzites are not mentioned (Pontifex and Sweet 1972; Sweet *et al* 1974).

Many of the existing rock paintings in the Victoria River area were partly or totally executed in fine-grained pigments. In many instances these pigments appear to have penetrated the rock face, but whether they have actually formed chemical bonds with the fabric of the rock or been covered with silica is difficult to determine through visual inspection alone. Nevertheless, the fact that they have penetrated the rock surface suggests that another factor is at work to prevent long-term preservation of art throughout most of the Victoria River area.

The climatic regime in the Victoria River district is not greatly different from Arnhem Land or the Kimberleys. All three regions experience annual extremes of a wet season/dry season monsoonal cycle. Therefore, the rock types present in each region seem to be the crucial factor in the difference between the preservation of paintings in Arnhem Land and the Kimberley on the one hand, and the Victoria River area on the other.

This conclusion is supported by observations of the rock formations in each area. In general, the sandstone in the Victoria River district is relatively soft and unsilicified, and in appearance more closely resembles the formations around Laura, in south-east Cape York, or the quartz sandstone of west Arnhem Land, than the orthoquartzite sandstones of the latter area (pers. obs.). The orthoquartzite forming many Arnhem Land shelters is a very hard, highly silicified sandstone (Hughes and Watchman 1983: 78). The hardness of this rock is such that ledges in the shelters have often had flakes removed for utilisation as stone tools (Brandl 1973: 3; pers. obs.). With few exceptions, the rock-types

forming the Victoria River shelters have not been utilised in this way (see Lewis 1984: 60). The exceptions are mostly in the very areas where the few Mimi-type paintings thought to be relatively old are located.

In the Victoria River district it thus appears that most of the geology of the region is not conducive to the long term preservation of rock paintings. It would appear either that the pigments were only rarely bonded to the rock by silica formation or other means, or that the parent rock is not hard or stable enough to preserve a pigment-stained surface for millenia. Indeed, both factors may have combined to work against long-term preservation of the rock paintings. Just how long paintings may last when painted on 'standard' Victoria River sandstone is discussed below.

Dating Victoria River Paintings

In the Victoria River valley no attempt has been made to identify and directly date pigments that may contain an organic component, nor has the attempt been made to date mineral coatings found on either paintings or engravings. In other words, there has been no attempt at direct dating of Victoria River rock paintings. At the present time rock art with mineral coatings, located in the Flora River section of Wardaman country, is being examined with a view to dating (Alan Watchman pers. comm.). No dates have yet been obtained.

No rock art has been recovered from archaeological excavations in the Victoria River valley. This is perhaps not surprising as no excavations have been carried out in the Victoria River valley proper since Davidson's pioneering work in 1930 (Davidson 1935: 152; Chapter 5). Davidson did not report any buried rock art, and the possibility of finding buried art has not arisen since then.

The main body of evidence for the age of Victoria River rock paintings is found in the subject matter of the art itself, in the form of historic records of a number of galleries, and in tenuous

extrapolations of dates for particular styles and motifs from Arnhem Land. These lines of evidence are set out below.

'Old' Victoria River Paintings

In Chapter 3 I described a series of motifs in red or black pigment and suggested that these may be the earliest in a two-part chronological sequence of Victoria River painted art. In Arnhem Land and to some extent the Kimberley, the earlier phases of such relative sequences have been tentatively dated through correlation of subject matter in the art with geomorphological, archaeological or ecological data of known age (see Crawford 1968 for the Kimberley; Lewis 1988a for Arnhem Land).

In Victoria River art such correlations are not yet possible. There is virtually no information available about ecological, archaeological or geomorphological changes in the Victoria River valley and even if such information were available, the paintings that I have recorded do not appear to portray subject matter that would facilitate such correlations. The only way that even the roughest dates can be suggested for these paintings is by comparing them with similar paintings in areas where dates have been suggested. This is possible for a number of the Victoria River paintings which resemble particular motifs and styles in Arnhem land.

In 1984 I argued that a number of Victoria River red ochre paintings including an unidentified animal with surface features indicated (Figure 4), 'grass' prints (Figure 5), and human figures with headdress and boomerangs (Figure 7), were related to certain styles of Arnhem Land Mimi art. In the case of the 'grass' prints, my reasons for suggesting such a relationship were the fact that previous to my discovery, such prints were only known from Arnhem Land, and that in both areas the prints are in red ochre which appears to have bonded with the rock face. In Arnhem Land the 'grass' prints are often spatially associated with prints of hands and thrown objects. The recent discovery of prints of 'grass', hands, and thrown objects on a single rock face

at a site in the West Baines River catchment has substantially strengthened the argument that Victoria River 'grass' prints and Arnhem Land 'grass' prints are contemporary (see Plate 28).

The age of prints of 'grass' and associated motifs is problematic. At present, age estimates are based upon little more than appearance and speculation. Chaloupka (1984: 16-17, 20) suggests that such prints are at least 18,000 and possibly 35,000 years old. My own estimates are far more conservative. I have suggested that such prints are probably part of the 'Boomerang Period' and the 'Hooked Stick/Boomerang Period' of Arnhem Land art, covering a period of approximately 6-9000 years (Lewis 1988a: 70, 105). It is quite possible that some 'grass' prints are much more recent; all that can be said for the Victoria River 'grass' prints is that they are likely to predate the most recent period of painted art, and may be some thousands of years old.

In colour, painting technique, and certain stylistic features, some of the possibly old Victoria River paintings resemble certain early Arnhem Land paintings. Early Arnhem Land paintings are characterised by the use of red ochre which, in many instances, appears to have bonded to the rock face. Many are line paintings with surface details indicated. Human figures are usually small, and are often portrayed wearing headdress and carrying boomerangs. The relationship between paintings in a group is conveyed through the careful overlapping of the figures.

Many of the possibly old Victoria River paintings share a number of these traits. For example, all of the red ochre paintings appear to have bonded to the rock face. The birds and mammal in Figure 10 and the anthropomorphic being in Figure 11 are fine line paintings and the birds have surface features indicated. The unidentified animal in Figure 4 also has surface features indicated while the group of humans in Figure 7 has boomerangs, 'headdress', and is connected as a group by careful overlapping. These traits are sufficiently characteristic of early Arnhem Land art to suggest the possibility of a shared artistic tradition, and therefore the possibility that the Victoria River paintings are some thousands of years old.

The other paintings - in particular the animal-headed beings associated with plants with 'tubers' - are more difficult to relate to rock art in Arnhem Land or elsewhere. In one Arnhem Land art period there is a clear association between flying foxes, yam plants with tubers, and Rainbow snakes (Brandl 1973: 174; Chaloupka 1984: 34; Lewis 1988a: 39), but they are quite different in appearance from the Victoria River paintings. It is possible that the Victoria River and Arnhem Land paintings are different ways of expressing a similar, contemporary set of ideas, but this remains conjectural. Like the hand prints, 'grass' prints and thrown object prints, all that can be said is that they appear to predate the most recent period of Victoria River rock art. It is to this most recent period - encompassing the bulk of Victoria River paintings - that I now turn my attention.

Recent Victoria River Paintings

While the evidence is generally against the possibility of long-term preservation such as that found in Arnhem Land, there is, nevertheless, reason to believe that many of the paintings could be several centuries old and that some may be substantially older. The evidence consists primarily of estimates of the rate of deterioration of paintings over known lengths of time. Such estimates are possible through the existence of several early records of rock paintings at sites which have recently been relocated.

Baines's Drawings

The first of these records is one of several sets of paintings sketched and later reproduced in colour by Thomas Baines, the official storekeeper and artist on Gregory's North Australian Expedition of 1855-56 (Plates 1, 2 and 3). The paintings in question are representations of fish strung together on a stick passed through their gills and mouth (Plates 92, 93, Figures 108, 109), and a series of anthropomorphic figures and snake-like motifs. Baines's painted version makes it appear that all of the

paintings occur on the one rock face, but the caption accompanying the illustration explains that there are two galleries '...on rocks nearly a 1/4 mile from each other'.

Gregory's journal entry of April 14th 1856 mentions paintings of fish and snakes seen near the evening camp and sketched by Baines (Gregory 1981: 147). By correlating the date of this entry with the date on Baines's drawing, and with the dates of their camps included on Gregory's official map (copy at the A.N.U. Archives of Business and Labour), there can be no doubt that the fish paintings sketched by Baines come from the same location as those I recorded during my field research in 1984.

The paintings are at a site known to local Aborigines as Jililjawun, which according to Anzac Munganyi, translates as 'fish on a string'. Baines's record of this panel is reasonably accurate. His record and my own both show white fish at the left and red fish at the right, and the orientation of the fish in each record is comparable (cf Plate 1 with Plates 92, 93, and Figures 108, 109). One difference is that Baines's illustration does not include a white outline around the red fish, traces of which are visible in my colour transparencies. There is no way of knowing whether this outline was added some time after Baines's visit or if it was present and he neglected to include it in his drawing.

Baines's estimate that the second lot of paintings - the anthropomorphs and snake-like motifs were '1/4 mile' (400-450 metres) from the fish paintings is inaccurate. They are in fact more than three kilometres apart. Comparison of his drawing with the actual paintings shows that, even with allowance for paintings being added since his visit, Baines's rendition of this gallery is less accurate than his sketch of the fish. This is perhaps not surprising as the paintings in this gallery are far more complex than the paintings of fish.

Of the two records made by Baines, the panels of fish are the best example for comparative purposes. Before any comparison can be made, it must first be determined whether or not the paintings were retouched during the intervening period. Close comparison of Baines's drawing with my photograph shows that the number

and placement of the fish in each panel does not match. This could be taken to indicate that the paintings have been retouched since Baines's visit. However, if this were so, one would expect traces of pigment from the original paintings to be visible underneath or adjacent to the edges some of the existing fish designs. This is especially so with the very long lasting red pigment which, in this instance, appears to have penetrated the pores of the rock. Examination of the paintings *in situ* reveals no evidence that the paintings have ever been retouched; no trace of earlier paintings is visible. Nor does it appear that the rock face has broken away and the fish designs recreated in the recent past. Therefore, the most likely explanation for the difference between the two records is that Baines exercised artistic licence.

At the present time the paintings are still in good condition, clearly visible from the banks of Gordon Creek some fifty metres away. They are located high on the shelter wall where they are well protected by an overhang up to two and a half metres wide. If, as seems to be the case, these paintings have already survived at least one hundred and thirty years in good condition, there is no reason to believe that they could not last for several centuries or longer. Unfortunately Baines's record does not provide clear evidence for the condition of the paintings at the time he sketched them. We do not know whether they were then bright and fresh, having been only recently executed, or if they looked much the same as they do today. We do know, however, that the paintings are at least one hundred and thirty four years old and remain in relatively good condition.

Birtles's Photograph

The second early record that provides evidence for the lasting qualities of rock art in the region is a photograph taken by Francis Birtles and published in the *Australasian Photographic Review* in 1910 (Plate 94). More than sufficient detail exists in this photograph to enable its identification as the gallery at Pururmi, a Centipede Dreaming on the Victoria River near Timber Creek. I first visited this gallery in 1971, and revisited it in 1985 when I took the photograph shown in Plate 95.

Comparison of the 1910 photograph with my own shows some marked changes as well as some remarkable preservation. The group of hand stencils and the snake painting visible on the left side of the 1910 photograph have largely disappeared by 1985. This has been caused, in part, by over-painting and then subsequent weathering of the new designs. Immediately above this panel, a row of six conjoined white anthropomorphs has visibly deteriorated as has the white outline of the face to their left. However, the eyes of this face are significantly brighter than the outline and the clear impression of finger-print whorl marks in these eyes indicates relatively recent retouching. The white outline of the centipede painting at centre-right has also deteriorated, especially towards the more exposed, right-hand end.

The best preserved of the original (1910) paintings appear to be the two central figures, a horizontal anthropomorph superimposed on a large emu-like design. Significantly, these two paintings are the most deeply placed and therefore best protected of the designs visible in the photographs. Apart from the instance mentioned above, none of the paintings appears to have been retouched since 1910. It therefore seems clear that the greater the degree of protection from the weather, the longer the artworks will last. It is also obvious that white pigment deteriorates much faster than red. Birtles's photograph provides striking evidence that rock paintings in well protected locations may survive relatively unchanged over a seventy year period.

Pike's Photograph

During production of the film *Jedda* in 1950-51, a gallery of paintings was discovered by members of the film crew. The largest painting, a horizontal anthropomorphic figure, was photographed by Phillip Pike. Subsequently, two photographs were used in an uncredited article, published in *Walkabout* (1955 December issue: 27). One of the photographs is an oblique shot, showing an unidentified man standing beside the painting. The other photograph is reproduced here as Plate 96.

I have relocated this painting which is in an elevated shelter overlooking the Victoria River in Nungali language area (Plate 97, see Map 3). Because of its location it is impossible to obtain a good photograph unless it is visited at daybreak; for the rest of the day it is exposed to full sunlight. Unfortunately, I was unable to visit the site in ideal conditions.

The figure has a red base silhouette, outlined with white pigment and with white stripes along the length of its body. Its head has an infill of yellow and white strips set at right angles to the body. There are several dividing lines in red and white across the neck and body, and a band of red divides the body lengthwise from the chest line to the 'tail'. Most of the 'tail' is solid red pigment. It has been painted with only one arm and no legs, and extending along the bottom edge of the body there is a snake-like motif in solid red pigment. Both the main figure and the snake-like motif have a solid red circle outlined in white, located in what is presumably the genital area.

Attempting to determine the degree of change in the painting since Pike's visit is difficult because of the relatively poor quality of both Pike's photograph and my own. However, it is clear that little deterioration has taken place during this thirty nine to forty year period. The main observable difference is in the brightness of the white pigment of the painting. All things being equal in the future, the relatively good condition of this painting after two decades or more suggests that its lifespan could surpass a century.

The Most Recent Paintings

Depictions of Europeans, their livestock and material goods demonstrate that rock paintings were being produced during the contact period (see Plates 33, 75, 98-103; Figure 39). One example, a painting of a bullock, has the V.R.D. 'bull's head' brand indicated on the rump area (Plate 101). This brand was not introduced until 1909 (Makin 1983: 99), so the painting (or at least the brand) could not have been produced before that date.

Another example probably represents sheep which were present on Victoria River Downs in the early 1890's (Plate 100).

The extreme freshness of 'traditional' figures at several other locations suggests quite recent execution or retouching (eg Plate 104) and in two cases this subjective assessment has been confirmed by European sources.

In 1982 Aboriginal custodians took me to a restricted men's site which has one of the largest painted galleries I have seen. Paintings at the site consist of a very large number of human figures, Rainbow snakes, fish, crocodile, a pelican, a macropod, and sacred objects, and are among the brightest I have seen. I later learned from a former V.R.D. employee and rock art enthusiast that in 1975 another European station employee witnessed Tim Yilngayari retouching some of these paintings (pers. comm. Bill Midgley). Tim was one of my informants (see Chapter 8); I did not question him on his actions because, at the time that I interviewed him, I was not aware that he had retouched the paintings.

Another set of paintings which have a strikingly fresh appearance are a series of human figures in a shelter on a tributary of Gordon Creek (Plate 105, see Map 3). The colours of these paintings are extremely bright and, as of 1985, there was only one mudwasp nest on the panel. On the floor below the figures a square slab of rock used as a grindstone is heavily coated with red ochre, and there are splashes of red and white pigment on rocks beneath the figures.

At the 1988 AURA Congress in Darwin, Willie Pedersen, a friend of the then manager of Victoria River Downs, told me that the manager had witnessed the creation of these paintings in 1982. This panel of figures, apparently produced only eight years ago, is probably the most recent rock art in the Victoria River district. It provides dramatic evidence for the ongoing significance of rock art in local Aboriginal cultures.

Dating Victoria River Engravings

To date, no studies have been carried out with the specific aim of dating Victoria River engravings. No excavations have been conducted, and therefore no engravings have been recovered from datable archaeological deposits. At this stage dates can only be suggested by inference. For example, by establishing the range of subjects portrayed, the presence or absence of particular motifs can be related to other data of known age.

Another inference is that a date obtained in a neighbouring catchment for a particular type of engraving can be applied to the same type of engraving in the Victoria River valley. The relative condition of engravings produced by one technique is suggestive, particularly in relation to painted art in the region. Because the evidence for age varies according to the engraving technique involved, I will examine each technique separately.

Abraded Engravings

At several sites in the Flora/Daly River catchment (Wardaman language area), there are abraded depictions of ships. At another site there are depictions of what appear to be horse hoof tracks. This subject matter clearly indicates that the abrading technique was in use in the Flora/Daly catchment during the contact period. In the same region, at Ingaladdi shelter on Willeroo Station, Mulvaney (1975) unearthed rock fragments bearing abraded grooves from archaeological deposits between 5000 and 7000 years old.

Although it is possible that there were two periods when the abrading technique was in use, it is a more reasonable assumption that the technique was in use in the Flora/Daly catchment throughout the past 5-7000 years. Although the evidence is confined to the catchment area adjacent to the Victoria River valley, ethnographic evidence, the stone industries exposed on local surface scatters, and the rock art itself, all indicate strong cultural links between the two regions. It therefore seems reasonable to assume that the

evidence from the Flora/Daly catchment has a bearing on Victoria River prehistory, and that abraded grooves were probably being created in the latter region during the last 5-7000 years.

The variant of the abrading technique where the rock surface is lightly rubbed may also have a similar antiquity. However, once the altered surface repatinates, this type of engraving would be impossible to detect, and the chances of finding an example in an archaeological deposit is probably remote.

Scratched or Incised Art

No evidence is available for the maximum age of this technique in the Victoria River valley or adjacent areas. In some examples I have seen, the scratched lines are extremely shallow and are likely to be subject to the same limiting factors outlined above with respect to the 'rubbed' motifs. In terms of minimum age, the existence of a number of depictions of mounted horsemen clearly demonstrates that this technique was in use during the contact period.

Pecked Engravings

Minimum Age

In the Victoria River valley some pecked engravings have a very fresh appearance. Some of these engravings look fresh because the pecked lines have been abraded at a later stage. This has removed the patinated surface and revealed fresh subsurface stone on the high points within the grooves, but has left pits that still have the original patination. However, some engravings with a very fresh appearance have not been 'freshened' in this manner, and do not in other ways exhibit the effects of exposure to the elements.

In the catchment of the West Baines River I have recorded ten sites with pecked engravings, of which five contain motifs that

look extremely fresh. At four of these sites the pecked engravings are very shallow and there can be little doubt that they are of 'recent' origin rather than 'old' examples that have recently been reworked in any way. For example, on the wall of very large shelter which contains well over two hundred and fifty hand prints, several hand stencils, and prints of 'grass' and thrown objects (all in red pigment), there is a small image of a kangaroo-like animal (Plate 106). This has been pecked into dark red-brown rock to reveal pale sub-surface stone, and retains a very fresh appearance. There are no other engravings on this wall.

At another site a representation of an unidentified mammal is patinated in one section and unpatinated in another. Again, there is no indication that this is an old engraving that has been reworked. Rather, it appears that in this instance, the process of repatination has not been uniform across the rockface. While it cannot be stated with certainty, it seems likely that the engraving has been executed relatively recently and has only partly repatinated.

Near ground level on the wall of a third site there are deeply pecked representations of two kangaroo-like animals (Plate 89) and a human figure (Plate 51), each of which have been outlined with white paint. The pecked section of each motif has exposed pale sub-surface rock which has a fresh appearance in comparison with the adjacent unpecked surface. In addition, the engraved human figure has been pecked through the red painted silhouette of a human figure and a red linear design.

At a fourth site an outline of an extremely large anthropomorphic figure (Figure 86) has been lightly pecked into a shelter wall. This is the only pecked engraving at the site and has clearly cut through weathered red paintings on the same rockface.

The two anthropomorphic figures that have been pecked through painted art, the combination of pecked and painted techniques, and the unpatinated appearance of the pecked sections of each motif suggests that some pecked engravings in this area were

being produced within the past few centuries, and that they were being produced concurrently with paintings.

Maximum Age

With the few exceptions described above, all pecked engravings in the Victoria River district exhibit aspects of deterioration common to pecked engravings over much of the continent (Edwards 1971: 360 and plates 9-11, 13-18, 25-27). The engravings are patinated, and many have been damaged by either honey-comb weathering (Plates 81, 82, 85), spalling, or cracking (see Plates 16, 79, 86, 88).

Others have been executed on huge slabs and boulders that have shifted substantially from their original positions, or have had other boulders shift onto them (see Plates 108-111). Some have large sections completely weathered away or broken off (Plates 88, 85). At one site several figures have been uniformly affected by water flow which has produced a shiny black patina identified by Watchman (pers. comm.) as manganese-based rock varnish.

While the condition of most Victoria River pecked engravings is comparable with the condition of pecked engravings elsewhere in Australia, particularly sites with so-called Panaramittee style engravings, I have already pointed out that condition alone is an unreliable guide to age. Additional clues may be found through examination of the subject matter of the engravings.

To date, I have recorded approximately 650 pecked engravings. Of these, only 250 are sufficiently well preserved for clear identification or depict identifiable subject matter other than tracks. None of the pecked engravings depict European contact items. This could be taken as evidence that at the time of European contact, pecked engravings were no longer being produced, but such a conclusion could be premature.

Of over 4,500 *painted* motifs at 306 sites, I have recorded only 30 contact motifs at eleven sites. I have been told of three

other contact art sites in the region, but do not know how many contact motifs these sites contain. In any case, it is clear that contact motifs form only about .6% of ^{the} regions' painted art.

With pecked engraving sites constituting a little over 18% of art sites, and pecked engravings only 5.5% of the total number of artworks, the absence of contact motifs among the pecked engravings does not necessarily indicate that the technique pre-dates European contact. It is possible that the absence of contact motifs among the pecked engravings merely reflects the much greater rate at which paintings were being produced in the region. The absence of contact motifs does not preclude the production of some pecked engravings during the contact period.

Apart from depictions of contact items, other subject matter that could assist in determining maximum age would be depictions of archaic material culture items or extinct faunal species. Unfortunately, the technique of pecking does not usually result in the relatively detailed representations which are necessary if subject matter is to be correlated with excavated material culture items. This is certainly the case with Victoria River district pecked engravings where the only unambiguous material culture items I have found portrayed are boomerangs held by human figures (see Plate 79).

In the Pilbara region of Western Australia there are engraved depictions of the Thylacine or Tasmanian Tiger (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*), an animal now extinct on the Australian mainland. No depictions of extinct faunal species have been recorded in the Victoria River engravings, but this does not necessarily mean that species now extinct were not present when some of the surviving pecked engravings were produced. The generalised style and highly weathered condition of many of the motifs makes species identification extremely difficult. Therefore, the absence of extinct fauna may be more apparent than real and cannot be taken as an indication of the upper age limit of the Victoria River pecked engravings. I should also point out that along with the thylacine and Tasmanian devil

(*Sarcophilus harrissi*), the dingo also appears to be absent from the pecked engravings I have recorded.

Further clues to the age of the engravings are evident through a comparison of the engravings with the paintings.

The Relationship of the Pecked Engravings to the Paintings

Comparison of the pecked engravings with the paintings reveals two important points. First, only two pecked engravings have been found that cut through painted art; at five sites, paintings are superimposed on pecked figures. Second, there are assemblages of pecked motifs whose subject matter does not reflect the cultural significance of the area.

Taken at face value the first point implies that, as a general rule, Victoria River pecked engravings are older than the paintings which almost certainly span several centuries and possibly much more. However, the situation is not so simple and clear cut.

It should be remembered that of 306 art sites recorded, only 56 sites have pecked engravings. In absolute numbers there are far more paintings in the Victoria River district than there are pecked engravings. If the production of the pecked engravings overlapped to any significant degree with the production of the paintings, there would be a much greater chance of engravings having paintings superimposed than vice-versa. Furthermore, at 37 of the sites the motifs are on exposed pavements, or on rock faces that are either fully exposed or that have minimal protective overhang. The exposed sites include those with the largest concentrations of motifs (one site in Mudbura country has well over one hundred individual motifs). In other words, the engravings are most often found in locations where paintings would not be executed or, at least, would not be expected to survive for more than a short time.

The significance of the second point relates to the cultural significance of the sites in question. I have recorded many sites where there are paintings that clearly illustrate the Dreaming beings that were active in the area. Several of these sites also have engraved figures that clearly do not represent these beings.

The best example I have is from a site on Gordon Creek called Kupakalarni. In the public sphere, the Dreaming beings of central importance at Kupakalarni are turtle and 'porcupine' (echidna) and these animals figure prominently among a variety of painted figures in shelters there (eg Plate 48, Figure⁵⁷_λ). On a cliff face adjacent to one of the painted shelters there are pecked outline engravings of five macropods, three turtles, a crocodile, and a snake-like motif (Plate 81; Figure 94). One of the macropods has a turtle depicted within its body outline while another encompasses two turtles. These motifs clearly do *not* reflect the public mythology for the site, *nor* do they depict Dreaming beings described in any of the restricted levels of meaning to which I have been granted access. The careful depiction of the turtles within the body outlines of two of the macropods almost certainly indicates a relationship between the animals, but I have never heard of an association between macropods and turtles in any aspect of Victoria River Aboriginal culture.

When I asked Aborigines why there were kangaroos with turtles inside them they had no convincing explanation. Their suggestions ranged from 'They belong to there, they all belong to that waterhole, Kupakarlin [Kupakalarni] water' (Anzac Munganyi) to '...that's only they bin draw'im. There now draw up, old people' (Alan Young).

The engravings at Kupakalarni are large and would have entailed a considerable expenditure of energy; it seems unlikely that the artist(s) would have produced only images of beings of secondary importance to the site, or of no importance at all, at the expense of beings that were of key importance there. It therefore seems likely that at some time in the past, turtles and kangaroos were of central importance at Kupakalarni, and

that over time the significance of the site changed so that turtles and echidnas became the central figures.

Summary: Paintings and Pecked Engravings

At this time very little hard evidence is available for the age of either paintings or engravings in the Victoria River valley, and nothing certain can be said about the origins of either technique in the region. The discovery of ochres in Pleistocene deposits throughout Australia, and the age of existing paintings in Arnhem Land, suggest that the *practice* of rock painting may have a very great antiquity throughout the continent. There is no reason to believe that the Victoria River valley would have been an exception. Similarly, dates from Cape York and South Australia indicate that rock engraving was probably a continent-wide practice during the Pleistocene. Again, there is no reason to suspect that the Victoria River region was exceptional.

In regard to paintings, circumstantial evidence suggests that before about 6000 BP, the Victoria River district was part of a continuous art province extending from Arnhem Land to the Kimberleys. A small number of Victoria River paintings may be evidence of such a connection but this remains to be confirmed. Historic records document the survival of paintings in several galleries for periods of fifty, seventy, and one hundred and thirty four years; there can be little doubt that many Victoria River paintings are at least several centuries old. The presence of contact motifs and an eyewitness account of the production of paintings in 1982 indicate that the practice of rock painting is ongoing.

As a body of art, Victoria River pecked engravings are likely to cover a greater time span than the bulk of the surviving paintings. I believe it probable that the majority of such engravings are older than the majority of paintings, but a number of examples suggest that some pecked engravings were being produced in the very recent past, concurrently with painted art.

4 HISTORY

Introduction

Victoria River people differentiate themselves on the basis of their relationship to particular tracts of land. There are contexts in which the boundaries between groups identified in this way become blurred, and groups sometimes defined by Aboriginal people as 'different' may, at other times or in other contexts, be described as 'the same'. Language is one basis for the differentiation of country and people, and is thus an important basis of social identity.

An understanding of traditional social organisation, transmission of religious knowledge, and inheritance of rights to country is of relevance to the rock art analysis presented here. However, among the language-identified groups in the Victoria River district, there are variations in these aspects of the social system. Such differences are apparent when comparing, for example, Bilinara and Ngarinman. The reasons for these differences appear to be historical, and it will be necessary to provide aⁿ historical account of the Bilinara and Ngarinman people, indicating as clearly as possible the various forces that have combined to produce the present situation.

It will become clear as this study progresses that no language-identified group is an isolated entity; each is part of an integrated regional network of social relations and religious responsibilities. These intergroup relationships ensure that events directly affecting one group ramify to affect other groups within the network. These ramifying events could in turn feed back to the group where the event first occurred. It is thus clearly inappropriate to try to understand the present situation of small groups without considering the history of the Victoria River region as a whole.

In the context of Aboriginal claims to land, I have already provided a reasonably comprehensive account of the history of a number of the language-identified groups whose territories exist

partly or fully within the boundaries of Victoria River Downs: the Bilinearra, Ngarinman, Ngaliwurru, and Karangpurru peoples (Rose and Lewis 1986, 1989). The experiences of these four groups encapsulate the range of effects that European settlement had on people within the Victoria River valley. Unless otherwise stated, the following is a summary of the histories of these groups.

Inferential History

Subsections

Possibly the earliest event that can be inferred is the development of the subsection system. On the basis of linguistic data, and to a lesser degree on historic and ethnographic evidence, McConvell (1985) argues that the subsection system first appeared in the region between the lower Victoria River and the Upper Daly River. He suggests that this came about when a four part section system originating in the Pilbara came into contact with another four part section system originating to the south of Darwin. In the area of contact the two systems were amalgamated to form a new, and qualitatively different, eight part subsection system which was then adopted by successive groups throughout much of the Northern Territory and north-eastern Western Australia. On the age of the subsection system, McConvell (ibid: 24) states that, '...the time scale involved in the diffusion of subsections may not be very long (hundreds, certainly, rather than thousands of years), 80-100 years is plainly too short.'

Smallpox

The other major event or series of events that may be inferred to have affected the Victoria River region is smallpox. In recent years a number of researchers have discussed the impact of smallpox epidemics on Aboriginal societies (Butlin 1985; Campbell 1983, 1985; Macknight 1986; Kimber 1988). Of these accounts, Campbell's papers contain the best summary of historic documentation of Aboriginal traditions of epidemics, observations of the sickness or its aftermath by explorers and settlers, and the

discovery of mass burials in a number of areas. From these sources, Campbell documents the occurrence of at least two and possibly three epidemics among Aborigines - the first from 1789 into the 1790's, the second from about 1829 into the early 1830's, and the third in about 1860.

Campbell (1983; 1985) considered the likely impact of smallpox on Aborigines in light of the findings of the Global Commission of Smallpox Eradication (World Health Organisation 1980) and of historical studies from the Americas. She has used this data to argue for what she believes were Australia-wide epidemics and to develop a model of the likely demographic impact of these epidemics.

According to Campbell, at each introduction the disease would have spread quickly through most parts of the continent. During the first epidemic, when evidence suggests that no-one had any immunity, case fatalities may have reached 75% (1983: 357). The fatality rate during the second and third epidemics may have been up to 45% because survivors from earlier epidemics were immune to reinfection. Pregnant women, children and infants were much more susceptible than men. Kimber (1988: 64) has used some of Campbell's data to estimate a death ratio of two women for every man.

Several lines of evidence, including observations of pock-marked Aborigines, indicate that smallpox outbreaks occurred in Arnhem Land in the 1820's and 1860's (Macknight 1986: 72-73), and in Central Australia (Kimber 1988). Kimber (ibid: 63) cites one European observer who states that smallpox spread south out of the Adelaide River area. Once established in the relatively high populations of this area, the epidemiology of the disease is such that its spread into and throughout the Victoria River valley is virtually certain. One may hypothesise that it spread along traditional lines of communication (trade routes), in which case it could have entered the Victoria River valley either through the Port Keats area or through Wardaman country. Limited ethno-historical evidence suggests a Wardaman connection (Deborah Rose pers. comm.)

Effects of Smallpox

Kimber (1988) suggests that the possible effects of these smallpox epidemics may explain certain aspects of ethnographically recorded Aboriginal society. His suggestions are summarised below.

The probable higher survival rate of men may have led to an increased emphasis on the powers of males as compared with females. Added to this is the possibility that men had to take control of female ritual to ensure that necessary rites were conducted for the welfare of all. This could have added to men's ideas of their superior powers, and may have disenfranchised women of subsequent generations. Of note here is that the Tiwi people, isolated on Bathurst and Melville Islands, did not have gender restricted sites or myths, and very little in the way of gender-restricted ritual (Goodale 1971).

The scarcity of women may have resulted in increased fighting between different groups of men, or even within the same group. 'Fighting', in this context, might also have included sorcery. Two points are worth noting here. First, sorcery art appears to be almost totally restricted to the most recent art period in both Cape York (Trezise 1971: 10) and Arnhem Land (Brandl 1973: 186) Second, sorcery was not practiced among the Tiwi of Bathurst and Melville Islands (Goodale 1971: 224). Competition for women would have been intensive, not just through a desire to reproduce one's own future generations, but as an absolute question of survival. Increased competition could also have resulted in an increase in intergroup ceremonial life in an attempt to come to terms with the calamity, and to ease or resolve the ensuing tensions between groups. A similar response to calamity seems to have occurred in Arnhem Land during the rapid encroachment of the sea before about 6000 BP (Lewis 1988a: 91-92).

There may have been an increase in the severity and duration of initiation ceremonies and post-initiatory rites. This would act as a means of delaying the age at which men might legitimately claim a wife, and strengthen the control of old men over young as a means of controlling violence.

Kimber also suggests that the devastating loss of so many women and children could have led to an increased emphasis on fertility; whereas fertility may once have been moderately predictable, smallpox would have made it extremely problematic for many individuals and groups.

In sum, the effects of smallpox may have included a heightened concern for fertility, increased competition among men for women, transfers of knowledge from women's domains to men's domains, and heightened ceremonial activity, men's ritual in particular. Sorcery may have flourished both as an expression of competition for women and as a means of explaining the disaster with which the survivors were attempting to cope (cf Lindenbaum 1979 for an analysis of the relationship between lethal disease and sorcery).

While there is no direct evidence from the Victoria River valley, the nature of the disease renders it almost certain that once started, smallpox swept throughout most of the continent. Such epidemics are likely to have had devastating effects on population numbers and on the ratio of male versus female survivors. Among other things, smallpox may have led to changes in rock art production or to the interpretation of existing art.

Exploration of the Victoria River Valley

Stokes

European knowledge of the Victoria River region began with Stokes' (1846: 41-117) exploration of the lower Victoria River from October to December, 1839. Stokes' expedition had minimal contact with Aborigines, and did not extend beyond the lower Victoria River, but his favourable report of the country he had seen influenced the formation of the 'North Australian Expedition', led by A.C. Gregory.

Gregory

In 1855, Gregory (1981: 99-194) established a principal base camp on the lower Victoria River. This camp was permanently manned for the duration of the expedition (eight months); from it Gregory led trips into the unknown interior. His first trip was in the nature of a reconnaissance, reaching the edge of Bilinara and Ngarinman territory, near the junction of the Wickham and Victoria Rivers (see Map 3).

During the much more extensive second trip, Gregory's party travelled through Ngarinman territory along the Wickham River, and then entered Bilinara country by following Depot Creek. On Depot Creek, Gregory again divided his forces. Leaving some men to guard excess stores, he led others on two major excursions into the hinterland, one into the desert far to the south-west, and the other to explore the eastern side of the Victoria River valley (see Map 3). In the course of these excursions, the explorers passed through Bilinara country several times, and also entered the lands of the Gurindji, Warlpiri, Mudbura and Karangpurru people.

On April 21st, 1856, the explorers broke camp and began their return journey to the lower Victoria. By retracing their steps down Depot Creek and along the Wickham River, Gregory's party recrossed Ngarinman territory before following the Victoria River downstream to the main depot (ibid: 148-150).

Ethnographic Observations

During their time on the upper Victoria River the explorers saw numerous signs of the Aborigines' activities. Near Depot Creek, for example, Baines (1857-58: 6-7) observed that:

'Agate was plentiful, and out of this and the trap rock the blacks had been making vast numbers of spears and tomahawks, by striking one stone against another, something after the process adopted in making gun-flints. The ant hills had been excavated in search of larvae and eggs, fresh water muscles [sic] had been fished up from the brooks, the trees had

been notched by climbers in search of lizards, bird's nests, or honey, and holes in the ground appeared to have served as cooking places for kangaroo or emu flesh, which, wrapped in sheets of bark, was heated by several applications of hot stones.'

Along Gordon Creek the explorers saw '...several native paintings on the sandstone rocks; they consisted of rude outlines of fish and snakes, some in red ochre and others in white clay' (see Plate 1; Gregory 1981: 147). This is the only mention of Aboriginal rock art in Gregory's published journal. However, Baines made ink sketches (later reproduced as paintings) of several other galleries besides the ones mentioned by Gregory (Plates 1, 2 and 3).

Baines (1857-58: 7) describes a 'dam' with a basket at an opening '...to receive the fish as they drive them through'. Both Baines (1857-58: 7) and Gregory (1981: 115) noted the existence throughout the district of numbers of stone structures which they could not identify (Gregory 1981: 115; Baines 1857-58: 7), but which are now known to be hawk hunting hides (see Lewis 1988).

It appears that in the upper Victoria country the only glimpse the explorers had of the Aborigines themselves was during several hostile encounters near the Depot Creek camp (Gregory 1981: 143). At that long-term encampment the Aborigines had ample time secretly to observe the whites, and perhaps to overcome initial fears. Baines made several sketches depicting these encounters, but the nature of the contact precluded close observation and there is little to be learned from the illustrations. Elsewhere in the district it seems likely that the Aborigines deliberately avoided the explorers, although they were probably aware of their day to day movements.

At the principal base camp on the lower Victoria River the opposite situation prevailed. The camp was permanently manned from October 1855, until June 1856, but written observations concerning local Aborigines are few and very brief. These records reveal little more than that there was regular and generally friendly contact with local Aborigines. In June 1856 the aims of

the expedition were accomplished and the explorers departed. As far as European visitors are concerned, after the departure of Gregory's expedition the Victoria River Aborigines were left in relative peace for more than twenty years.

While the written records concerning Aboriginal-European contact at the Victoria River Depot are poor, a number of excellent sketches of the Aborigines were made by Thomas Baines, official artist and storekeeper with the expedition. These sketches provide a good idea of how Aboriginal men looked and were armed on the lower Victoria before permanent European settlement irretrievably disrupted traditional life. The sketches were made outside the region which is the immediate focus of this study, but recent studies demonstrate a strong cultural homogeneity within the Victoria River district. It is therefore worthwhile examining the pictures in some detail.

Most of Baines's sketches are general scenes - views of the base camp, the expedition ship, the river, local ranges, European activities, and so on. Only a few sketches of Aboriginal men are detailed. One of the men depicted is bearded and has a narrow waist belt with what appears to be a bunch of feathers tied at the front. His hair is tied back in a short pony-tail and around his neck is a cord with a tassel hanging down his back. There are cicatrices on his shoulders and shoulder blades, and his face is reddened with ochre. Another sketch indicates what appear to be chest cicatrices (Braddon 1986: 68). Until recently (circa 1950's) chest and shoulder cicatrices were essential to the process of becoming a man.

In other illustrations men carry long notched lath spearthrowers, and spears with either multi-barbed wooden points or large stone blades. The multi-barbed spears and spearthrowers are identical to those still made on the lower Victoria River today, and used throughout the region.

Forrest

The last Europeans to visit the region before permanent settlement began were the explorers led by Alexander Forrest, who came out of the the Kimberley region and passed from west to east through the Victoria River valley in 1879 (Forrest 1880). On the West Baines River, an area now known to be western Ngarinman territory, Forrest saw 'two dams for catching fish...smoke from many fires to the north and...numbers of old camps scattered about' (ibid: 29).

Although they had only been in the bush for six months, by the time the explorers reached the Victoria River most of them were starving, sick, and desperate to reach safety at the overland telegraph line further to the east. After the Baines River they had only fleeting contact with Aborigines and recorded little more in the way of ethnographic observations than the presence of many Aboriginal fires along the Victoria River valley.

The members of Gregory's and Forrest's expeditions saw numerous signs of Aboriginal presence,^{but} none of the explorers reported seeing Aborigines in large numbers. There are no historic accounts from explorers (or early settlers) in the Victoria River valley of either smallpox or signs of previous illness, so there is no direct evidence that the disease was ever active in the region. Aborigines may have been sighted only in small numbers because they were generally fearful of the intruders and kept out of sight. However, it is also possible that large numbers of Aborigines were not encountered partly as the result of smallpox epidemics documented in other parts of the country.

If smallpox epidemics did affect Victoria River people, their immediate effects would have gone unrecorded because the dates of the epidemics do not coincide with any of the European explorations. Assuming the epidemics did afflict the region, the first occurred forty five to fifty years, and the second five to ten years before Stokes's visit. Gregory would have arrived twenty years after the second epidemic, and Forrest some fifteen or more years after the third.

Prelude to Settlement

Whatever impact or lasting significance the expeditions of either Stokes or Gregory may have had on Victoria River Aboriginal societies remains unknown. However, by the time that Forrest passed through the region there can be little doubt that Victoria River Aborigines knew of the presence of Europeans to their east.

In his book, 'The Other Side Of the Frontier' (1981) Henry Reynolds shows that in many parts of Australia, Aborigines living far beyond the frontier were well aware of Europeans, and had often received European goods along traditional trade routes. It is highly probable that during the decade before the stocking of the Victoria River valley, information about the Europeans who were present along the overland telegraph line had reached Victoria River people.

Mathews (1901: 83-84) states that Aborigines on the upper Victoria undertook long trips east to Newcastle Waters, north towards Katherine and west then back to the Victoria River. Dahl (1926) reports that Aborigines undertook long journeys out of curiosity to see Europeans and cites one example of an Aboriginal man from the Victoria River mouth who had visited Pine Creek for this purpose. If people from 'the other side of the frontier' did make trips to the settled districts out of curiosity to see the whites, the impression of Europeans that filtered through to Victoria River people is likely to have been negative rather than positive, for the first settlers on the Victoria River were met with spears (Cahill 1905).

The Settling of the Victoria River Valley

1883 saw the beginning of permanent European settlement of the region with the stocking of Victoria River Downs Station and Wave Hill Station (Makin 1983). In little more than a decade the lower reaches of the Victoria River valley were also settled with the stocking of Auvergne Station in 1886 and Bradshaw Station in 1894. The best documentation of the settlement process relates

to Victoria River Downs, although documentation for other cattle stations in the area indicates that the same patterns are applicable.

On Victoria River Downs, initial base camps were set up within Bilinara country, at Gordon Creek and a short distance to the south on Stockyard Creek (ibid: 64; see Map 3). Lines of communication were quickly established between the various homesteads, outstations, and supply points. In about 1888 a new main homestead was established at the present site on the Wickham River (Everitt 1888: 18). This was in Karangpurru country, but very close to the point where the territories of the Bilinara, Ngarinman, and Karangpurru come together (see Map 3). Stockyard Creek continued in use as an outstation into the 1890's, while new outstations were established in Bilinara country at Longreach Waterhole and at the present Pigeon Hole location (see Map 2). Both of the new outstations were located on the western banks of the Victoria on a section of river that forms the boundary between the Bilinara and Mudbura peoples (see Map 3).

The relationship between the Europeans and the Aborigines appears to have become hostile almost immediately. Cahill (1905) states that when the first Europeans arrived to look for a homestead site on the Victoria River Downs lease, they were met with a shower of spears. The following fifteen to twenty years saw a period of intense warfare throughout the region, with constant attacks and reprisals, and virtually no friendly contact between the Europeans and local Aboriginal people. This situation is perhaps best characterised by the statement of Crawford, the first manager of Victoria River Downs:

During the last ten years, in fact since the white man settled here, we have held no communication with the native at all, except with the rifle. They have never been allowed near this station or the outstations, being too treacherous and warlike. (Crawford 1895)

The process of settlement, and therefore the effects on the different language-identified groups, was largely determined by topography. Initially cattle were grazed on only a small part of the

total lease, beginning on the prime grazing areas, *viz*, the open black-soil downs bordering the large waterholes in the river and its major tributaries. As the herds grew, and the Europeans became more familiar with the country, the area under effective control widened, and pressures upon Aboriginal groups increased.

Topography also largely determined the lines of communication between the various European centres within and beyond the region. Where possible, roads were established through flatter, more open areas, and rough range country was avoided. Groups whose territory lay largely within rough range country were therefore less likely to encounter Europeans, and did not come into sustained contact as early as groups in the areas that were better for cattle or through which passed European lines of communication. Those in the sandstone ranges were also better able to escape from dangerous situations that might arise.

Within six years of settlement those Aborigines not killed in the initial skirmishes had been forced out of the prime grazing land and into rough sandstone country (Blair 1889: 15). Because rugged sandstone areas were virtually inaccessible for horsemen, and of little use for cattle grazing, they became permanent refuges for the Aborigines, and the bases from which raids into European-controlled areas were carried out. The availability of such refuge areas appears to have had an important bearing on current demographic patterns in the Victoria River area, and ultimately, on variations in social organisation and land tenure seen in the region today.

An extreme example of a group that had no refuge areas is the Karangpurru people who lived east of the Ngarinman and north-east of the Bilinara in open basalt country completely accessible to European horsemen. Much of their country was stocked very early and it was bisected by the Katherine to Kimberley road. This was the road taken by many of the miners who rushed to the Kimberley goldfields from 1885 to 1887, and along which Aborigines were said to have been shot like crows (Dashwood 1899: 23).

Of the various language identified groups on or adjacent to Victoria River Downs, the Karangpurru is the only one not mentioned by Mounted Constable Willshire (1896), the first policeman stationed in the region, and there was never any police activity in their area. This suggests that the combined effects of contact with station whites and with large numbers of travellers, left the Karangpurru largely decimated by the end of the first decade of settlement.

At the other end of the scale, Ngarinman country straddled the rugged Stokes Range. Roads skirted this rough region, and pastoral enterprises were not established there until early this century. Historic documents and oral traditions clearly indicate that the Ngarinman suffered some population loss due to conflict with Europeans. However, European settlement pressures did not reach a peak until early this century, by which time the Ngarinman had probably observed the fate of adjoining groups; 'escape' to the relative safety of European homesteads had become an established option. In any event, they are today one of the largest language-identified groups in the Victoria River district.

The experience of the Bilinara falls between these two extremes, although they ultimately suffered great population decline. A major part of Bilinara country is open downs country and homesteads were established there at first settlement. Without doubt they underwent fierce and intense pressure from the whites at the outset, but they were fortunate also to have access to large areas of broken sandstone in which they could take refuge and which enabled them to conduct a prolonged guerilla war.

From their sandstone fastness they were able to resist the Europeans more effectively than the Karangpurru; they were still a force to be reckoned with in 1894 when the first police station was set up in the area. The main refuge for Bilinara people was on the headwaters of Gordon Creek and was known to them as Bilimatjaru (Plate 112). Mounted Constable Willshire (Gordon Creek Police Journal, April 17th, 1895) described this region as consisting of:

'...enormous columns of sandstone cleft and piled one on the other, gullies Gorges, tunnels, and caves, comprise hundreds of square miles of sandstone country where it would be impossible for even 20 trackers to get a passing glimpse of blacks running about in it.'

The activities of Mounted Constable Willshire, and later Mounted Constable O'Keefe, ensured that the Bilinara had ceased to be a major problem to the cattle station, and in 1898 the police station was moved to Timber Creek. Although not as badly decimated as the Karangpurru, for a long time the Bilinara were in real danger of extinction. Today their numbers are growing rapidly.

'Blackfellow Wars'

Another aspect to the forced movement of people into the rough country was the outbreak or escalation of inter-group warfare. Aboriginal oral traditions from V.R.D. are unanimous in asserting that the early contact period was characterised by warfare among Aboriginal groups. Termed 'blackfellow wars' (*waringali*; Bilinara and Ngarinman), they are attributed to the abduction of women and to trespass by different groups during the early contact period.

Similar states of intense fighting have been reported from other regions of Australia (eg Warner 1958: 155-90), but contemporary European documentation of this situation is virtually non-existent for the entire Victoria River District. One brief account available concerns the abduction of two Bilinara women by the 'Jael' (Gurindji sub-group) Aborigines from Wave Hill, and their subsequent rescue by Bilinara men (Willshire 1896: 83-84; see also Love 1915: 40-41). Durack (1985: 85) describes a similar situation from the east Kimberley and suggests that the loss of women to Europeans caused Aboriginal men to seek wives elsewhere. Scarcity of women is also likely to have been one result of the smallpox epidemics, believed to have decimated populations on a number of occasions during the century preceding European settlement. Other likely causes of trespass

include the need to escape being shot by Europeans, and to search for food if local refuge areas became overcrowded and depleted of resources.

Victoria River people appear to have been hard hit both by Europeans and by other Aboriginal people during a period from 1883-1920, approximately. They may also have still been recovering from a male/female imbalance due to earlier smallpox epidemics. As with the European conflict, Aboriginal warfare involved both the loss of men and women through killing and the loss of young women who were 'stolen' from their family and country.

Dispersal

In addition to those people (mainly women) 'stolen' out of their own country by marauding men (white and black), there were other methods of dispersal. The common cattle station practice of seconding local people to work as drovers caused a certain amount of dispersal of both men and women during the earlier period of European contact (Dashwood 1899: 83; see also O'Keefe 1902). In addition, the government policy of removing people of mixed descent from their homes and families contributed to the dispersal of the Aboriginal population.

Station Employment

Although Crawford (1895: 180) indicates a state of complete warfare during the first decade of settlement, by the mid-1890's a small number of local Aborigines were employed on the stations (Gordon Creek Police Journal, March 18, 1895; see also Dahl 1926: 184). Whether this Aboriginal labour was voluntary or had been coerced in the manner described by Dashwood (1899: 83) and Hill (1970: 311) is uncertain. In reference to the east Kimberley region, Durack (1985: 84) states that the police would forcibly bring in young Aboriginal men and women to be put to work on the cattle properties. Again, there is no conclusive evidence that Victoria River Stations obtained labour in this way

although Mounted Constable Willshire regularly brought young women into the Gordon Creek Police Station (Willshire 1896: 34, 41, 61, 70-71) and place-names such as 'Kitty's Capture' and 'Rilly's Capture', mentioned by Mounted Constable O'Keefe, allude to European abduction of women (Gordon Creek Police Journal, 25th November, 1895; 18th January and 5th and 6th August, 1896).

By the turn of the century a blacks camp had been established at Victoria River Downs, and local Aboriginal stockmen were becoming readily available (Ronan 1962: 185). It seems likely that a similar situation would have prevailed at other stations in the region. Over the next twenty to thirty years the black resistance gradually dwindled and increasing numbers of Aborigines came in to the station camps nearest their own country to work for the Europeans.

From the mid-1920's until the period 1966-1972 when V.R.D., Wave Hill and Humbert River Aborigines went on strike, most able-bodied Aborigines were employed during the dry season as station hands or domestic help while the old people and children lived in camps close to the station homestead or outstations (Berndt and Berndt 1987; Cook 1930: 58; Sweeney 1947). During the wet seasons little work was carried out on the stations and most Aborigines were free to go on 'walkabout' (Toupiar 1930: 39; Willey 1971: 144; Wyatt, quoted in Read 1979: 36, section 7b). Indeed, to avoid the expense of providing food to unemployed workers and their dependents, the stations actively encouraged the return of Aborigines to bush subsistence by providing only a minimal amount of food as 'wet season rations'. On the other hand, Aboriginal people used this time in the bush to actively maintain and transmit their own culture to succeeding generations. One result of this situation is that many aspects of traditional culture have survived until the present time. For example, the major ritual called Kajiri or Big Sunday is still being performed, and rock paintings were being produced as recently as the early 1980's.

A series of strikes by Victoria River Aborigines between 1966 and 1972 (Doolan 1977) led to the formation of independent

Aboriginal communities at Daguragu, Yingawunarri, Yarralin, Lingara, Kilwi and Bulla (Map 2). Most Victoria River Aborigines now live in one or the other of these communities although some, like the Bilinara and Mudbura people at Pigeon Hole, still squat near European station homesteads. The strikes also focused national attention on the plight of Aborigines generally; ultimately this led to the passage through Federal Parliament of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (N.T.) Act, 1976*. Under the land rights legislation a number of claims to land have been made by Victoria River Aborigines, including the claims that I worked on, described in the Preface.

The strikes, and the granting of citizenship rights to Aborigines in 1967, led to major changes in cattle station economics. The legal requirement that Aborigines be paid award wages created the incentive to change from mustering cattle by stockmen to mustering by helicopter. As a result, the employment rate for Aborigines plummeted and the majority of Aborigines now survive on social welfare payments. At the same time, award wages and access to social welfare payments have incorporated Aborigines into the cash economy.

People now travel from community to community by motor vehicle rather than across country on foot. With comparatively few Aborigines still employed as stockmen, and the annual wet season walkabout a thing of the past, opportunities for direct experience of the location and significance of Dreaming sites, and various other aspects of traditional life (including rock art), have greatly diminished, although people use motor vehicles to visit sites and to harvest traditional resources whenever possible. At the present time Victoria River communities continue to enjoy a rich ritual life, to trade in traditional goods, and to transmit as many aspects of their culture as possible to their children.

Summary

The violent encounters between Aborigines and Europeans caused severe disruption and dislocation within Aboriginal society. This appears to have led to conflicts among the

Aborigines themselves, although this situation may have an earlier origin in the effects of smallpox epidemics. Resistance against the whites, and intergroup hostilities, gradually subsided over a fifty year period and as European control was consolidated, an increasing number of Aborigines opted to 'come in' to the homestead or outstation nearest their traditional country.

From the mid-1920's, almost all Aborigines were living in station camps. Able-bodied people were engaged in unpaid employment through the dry season and freed to go on 'walkabout' during the wet summer months. Although the traditional lifestyle was no longer possible, the combination of dry season mustering work and wet season 'walkabout' enabled most Aborigines to retain intimate links with their country and to maintain knowledge of Dreamings, ceremony, place names, bush resources, camp sites, and so on.

The decimation of population and disruption of traditional life brought about by European settlement led to changes in some aspects of Victoria River Aboriginal society. For example, in response to a vastly diminished population, people would have had to amplify the social-geographical extent of their marriage arrangements, and there would have been an increase in marriages between language groups. The importance of smaller social units appears to have decreased. It is also possible that there has been an increase of emphasis on cognatic descent models.

However, there is unlikely to have been significant change in the Dreaming identity of individuals and local groups. While social boundaries were probably always flexible and subject to change through time, Dreaming sites and Dreaming tracks function as fixed points of reference in the physical and social landscape. They are likely to remain far more stable than social groups.

Knowledge of Dreaming significance is also unlikely to have altered to any large extent since European contact, although there have undoubtedly been losses. Individual identity is linked to specific localised Dreamings as well as to particular travelling Dreamings, and knowledge about these Dreamings is held in

common among neighbouring and more widespread groups. In the case of the Karangpurru, sub-groups were apparently decimated or even wiped out, but knowledge of the Dreaming significance of Dreaming sites has survived in the minds of members of the remaining Karangpurru people and of other Aboriginal groups within the region.

Within the past two decades the wet season walkabout has ceased and access to stockwork has diminished. Generally speaking, people born since about 1960 have not had the direct experience of country and traditional life that older people had, but many aspects of traditional life - religion, trade, knowledge of bush resources, care of sacred sites - are still flourishing.

6 DREAMING

In order to discuss how rock art is perceived and interpreted by Victoria River people it will be necessary to provide a brief analysis of their cosmology - the general structure of the universe, its parts, its laws, and such characteristics as space, time, and causality. My focus is on rock art; accordingly I discuss those aspects of cosmology which are most relevant to an understanding of the art.

The cosmology of Victoria River people presented here is based on Rose's (1984) analysis. Her work was based primarily in the community of Yarralin, and her major informants were Aboriginal people who identified with Ngaliwurru, Ngarinman, Bilinara and Mudbura language territories. This is the only such analysis available for any Aboriginal group in the entire Victoria River region. The myths and conversations upon which this analysis is based were recorded during joint fieldwork by Rose and myself.

I should first state that Aborigines themselves do not offer an explanation of their cosmology in the manner presented below. Their term 'Puwarraj', translated as 'Dreaming', seems to come closest to the English term 'cosmology'. Long and detailed explanations are rarely given, or at least, rarely given in a manner which corresponds to western ideas of philosophical exegesis. Rather, the information necessary to explicate the world is taught and learned in small segments over the greater part of a lifetime. Information is coded in songs, dance, art, landscape, myths and stories, as well as in the daily knowledge of living in the world. No myth is definitive; in every instance, other public versions of the myth exists, and there are often versions which are restricted according to age or sex. Only public information has been used here.

Questions about cosmology invariably lead to discussions of Dreaming. As Stanner (1979: 23-40) and many others state, this concept is the most central and yet the most elusive aspect of Aboriginal culture. According to Stanner (*ibid*: 24), this 'subtle conception' is many things in one: a narrative of the heroic past

during which life came to be; a charter for the present; and a 'kind of logos or principle of order transcending everything'.

In Victoria River district Kriol, the term 'Dreaming' has a number of different meanings. It may refer to: 1) the *creation* of the world; 2) the *original creative beings* - Dreaming beings, or simply Dreamings; 3) *places* of creation; and 4) *acts* of creation. These are described more fully below. Point 5, the *relationship* between a human and other species (personal Dreamings, often called totems in earlier literature), will be discussed in Chapter 7.

The Creation Of The World

Victoria River Aborigines believe that in the beginning the earth was covered with salt water. The water rolled back to reveal a land devoid of life, but with some geographical features already in existence. Right across the newly revealed land, all the different forms of life, including some entities regarded by Europeans as inanimate or imaginary (eg the moon, Rainbow snakes), emerged from the moist ground. These were not ordinary lifeforms. The myths recounting their exploits, the marks they made on the earth, and the explicit statements of Aborigines, indicate that they possessed characteristics both of their own particular species and of humans. They were Dreaming beings (Dreamings), possessed of extraordinary power, able to change shape and size at will.

Each of the Dreaming beings interacted with (or avoided) other Dreaming beings, and performed actions which left indelible imprints on the newly-emerged landscape. Walking, dancing, digging or fighting, lighting fires, discarding artefacts or foods, leaving on the ground their bodies, parts of their bodies, or bodily secretions, they created many of the natural features still to be seen in the landscape today (see Plates 2, 8, 113, 114). In Stanner's words, 'The Aborigines thought the world full of signs to men' (1979: 113). Thus the concept that Dreaming creation is evidenced in the visible world is critical to the Aboriginal interpretations of rock art (Chapter 10).

In addition to creating the form of the land, Dreaming beings also brought languages, types of social organisation, ceremonies, and ways of doing things. People now have their own culture which was instituted by the Dreaming beings.

Dreaming Beings

Some became great travelling Dreamings, moving hundreds, even thousands of kilometres across the land (eg see Map 5). From the west and north-west came the Death Adder, the Black-headed Python and the Nanganarri Women, all travelling independently. From the same direction Eagle chased Egret (and killed him on the Victoria River near Pigeon Hole), a mob of Flying Foxes travelled to Station Hill near Jasper Gorge and threw spears to the east. The Flying Foxes were followed by Bat and Nightjar while further south, Emu and Corella travelled together as 'mates'. From the north came Male Children and Sugarbag (native honey) Bee. Frill-necked ('Blanket') Lizard and Gliding Possum travelled together carrying the Didgeridoo. Out of the southern desert Pigeon came, carrying grindstones to the saltwater country, while Rain and Lightning travelled together into Delemere country where their images may still be seen on the rocks. Other travelling Dreamings were active in the Victoria River valley; some are the subject of the most important secret ritual and some are apparently of minor importance. No Dreaming beings seem to have travelled from east to west.

As they travelled they found the land to be populated by numerous other Dreamings, the localised beings who lived permanently within relatively small areas. For example, as she travelled from Jasper Gorge to the Victoria River, Walujapi, the Black-headed Python by-passed or interacted with Eaglehawk, Turtle, Plains Kangaroo, Quail, Hopping Mouse, Crab, Centipede, Lightning, Pigeon, Crocodile and Barramundi (see Map 6). Localised Dreamings lived and moved within relatively restricted areas. Their actions define the smallest social unit, the 'family' area. I will discuss the social organisation of place, person, and Dreaming in Chapter 7.

Places of Creation

Eventually the Dreaming beings finished their travels, creative acts, and interactions with other Dreaming beings. Most are believed to be now immobile, inhabiting the natural features they created, and providing an eternal source of life or 'spirit' for the particular species or natural phenomena they represent. In effect they are maintaining in a relatively passive way the system of relationships they created.

Victoria River Aborigines believe that the present shape and content of the world was established in the Dreaming. Therefore, information about the Dreaming is encoded within the features of the landscape. They also believe that the Dreaming beings still inhabit and participate, sometimes actively, in the present world. People who are knowledgeable can interpret the physical features of the landscape or unusual events that might occur.

The entire landscape is the result of Dreaming activities and imbued with the power of Dreaming Beings. Dreaming power is concentrated in particular places recognised as foci of particular Dreaming events, but any feature may be interpreted in terms of the Dreaming.

Victoria River Aborigines view rock art according to these basic principles of their cosmology. To begin with, they deny a human origin for most images on rocks; they say that most images are the living presence of the Dreaming beings, rather than the product of ordinary human beings. In addition, they do not differentiate between 'natural' marks on the landscape, and the majority of 'marks' that western-educated people identify as humanly-produced 'art'.

Acts of Creation

While most of the Dreaming beings are now 'fixed' in the landscape, some are believed still to be mobile and active in every country within and beyond the Victoria River region. These are

like other Dreamings in that there are recognised sites where they were active, either in a localised area or along defined tracks, but they are not merely immobile sources of life/spirit for the species they represent. These particular beings appear to have established principles or to have been involved in actions that are integral to the functioning of the cosmos and to have universal application. They continue actively to maintain the cosmic system they helped to create. Principal among these are the Rainbow Snake, Sun, Lightning people, Kaya ('debil debil'), and the Munga Munga Women. These are discussed more fully below.

Seasonality: Rainbow Snake, Sun, and Lightning

The Rainbow Snake, Sun and Lightning act in concert to reproduce the seasonal cycle. There are particular named places in the Victoria River district that are identified as Dreaming places for these beings, but they are also omnipresent. Rainbow snakes are said generally to inhabit every permanent waterhole, the sun is in the sky every day in all countries, and in the wet season lightning may be seen anywhere. They are best understood as being universally localised.

While all Rainbow snakes are potentially dangerous, those that live in recognised Rainbow Dreaming places are regarded as more dangerous, being the 'biggest' or the 'boss' of the other Rainbow Snakes. All Rainbow Snakes may take on various forms at will. Sometimes they look like ordinary snakes of a variety of species. At other times they may possess an animal head, with long ears, and may be of enormous size. Yet again they may be seen as an orthodox rainbow in the sky during wet weather.

Rainbow snakes are explicitly associated with a variety of different animal species, often termed 'mates' or 'bosses' for the Rainbow. These include flying foxes, frogs, certain grubs that live in river-side trees, turtles, crocodiles, catfish, and brolgas. In fact, almost any life form associated with water or with the wet season is, at least implicitly, associated with the Rainbow snake. Interacting with the Sun, the Rainbow Snake plays a key role in

the change of the seasons and each of its 'mates' interacts with the Rainbow in certain ways and at certain times.

In the extremely hot weather of the late dry season, flying foxes that had formerly been scattered across the landscape congregate in the branches of trees that overhang pools in the rivers. At this time the Rainbow snake is said to be young and restless. The presence of the flying foxes stimulates the Rainbow snake to leave the water and move up into the sky where it begins to shoot out lightning and spit (rain). It may also spit out 'rain-stones' (hail; see Plate 115). The first rain alerts the Lightning people who begin to flash their lightning with increasing frequency. Steam rising from the hot earth after the first rain forms clouds which produce more rain. The first rain also carries tadpoles to every pool. These eventually turn into frogs which 'sing out' to the Rainbow to bring more rain. The wind, formerly from the south-east, now blows from the north-west.

The increasing rain eventually causes floods. Whirlpools in the dark, muddy waters are caused by the Rainbow snake which may pull animals and people under, drown them, and eat them. Eventually the rains and floods attain a sufficient level to satisfy the needs of the land; significantly more rain would be detrimental. At this time, late in the wet season, the flying foxes are said to be underwater with the Rainbow snake. Some people state that while underwater the flying foxes are suckled by the Rainbow snake. The frogs and other species have stopped calling for more rain and the Rainbow is now growing old and tired after its exertions.

Throughout the wet season the wind had been blowing from the north-west. It now changes back to blow from the south-east and breaks the Rainbow's back. At the same time the sun reasserts its force and burns the Rainbow. Together, the wind and sun drive the Rainbow back to join its 'mates' in the rivers. The wind clears the clouds and brings up cold weather.

Away from the rivers the land is once again productive; flying foxes scatter to feed on the new blossoms and other animals proliferate and become fat. The sun is now dominant, drying out

the land and heating the earth. Eventually the land is dry and parched. Blossoms fall from the trees, flying foxes retreat to the riverside, and the whole process begins again.

The Sky Country: Lightning People

The 'sky country' is located above the stars but below the sun. It is sometimes referred to as 'lightning country' because it is the home of the Lightning people. It is also the home of the spirits of dead people. As well as being involved in the cycle of the seasons, Lightning people can draw ordinary humans into the sky country on 'strings' (lightning) and make them 'clever', that is, give them extra-ordinary powers. Because lightning is connected to rain, a person made clever by lightning has power over water - over rain, floods, victims of drowning, and the Rainbow snake.

Kaya - Custodians Of The Dead

Another type of Dreaming being is the Kaya. In English, Aborigines refer to Kaya as 'devil' or *debil debil*; Rose (1984) glosses the term as 'custodians of the dead'. Kaya have a human shape but have no flesh; they are skeletons. They live in caves where they guard human bones that have been deposited there at the end of mortuary rites. Kaya are feared by the Aborigines because if an opportunity arises they will steal people from the world of the living and eat their flesh. The spirits of these victims are not taken to the sky country, but are incorporated into the Kaya world - they become Kaya themselves.

Kaya have the power to make 'roads' (*wuma*) from the earth to the Sky Country along which they escort the spirits of dead people. These roads can be seen by humans as the rays of light that often radiate from a sunrise or sunset (eg Plate 116). Such 'roads' may appear at any time of the year, but in the Victoria River district they are particularly common and most impressive during the wet season. The wet season frequently produces an atmospheric condition which reflects such light rays to create either a false sunrise in the evenings or a false sunset in the

mornings. At such times, the light rays may form a spectacular display of great bands diverging from the sun, passing overhead, and converging on the opposite horizon.

Landscape and Dreaming Power

Whether Dreamings 'just walked around', established a principle or 'law', or travelled over long distances giving form to the physical and social world, the places where they performed specific acts or now reside are sources of on-going Dreaming power. In many instances people may draw upon this power for a variety of purposes.

For instance, during their travels from west to east, the Nanganarri Women left baby spirits in Bilinara country near Pigeon Hole. Women today can become pregnant by visiting this site, striking it with green branches, and telling the baby spirits to enter their (the women's) bodies. Similarly, at the Lily Dreaming site called Nawuwantarni, near Pigeon Hole, it is possible to release the life essence of lilies by performing the appropriate ritual (see Plate 117). This involves using green branches to brush a particular stone at the site while calling out the names of different waterholes in the region where it is desired that lily numbers should increase.

The Dreaming power in some sites can also be released accidentally, with dire consequences for human beings or the world at large. For instance, if a Sun Dreaming site near Montejinni homestead were to be bulldozed or otherwise damaged, the sun would shine incessantly and kill all life on earth (Map 2). Likewise, a standing stone in Ngarinman country is a Male Children Dreaming, with access restricted to men. If the stone were to be knocked over by cattle or otherwise damaged, all men would be severely impaired or die.

Sorcery

One particular use of Dreaming power is of special interest here because it involves the production of rock art, art on trees, or the manipulation of sites. This is the practice of malevolent magic or sorcery. I describe the process in detail because of its significance to the art.

Initiating Sorcery

In the Victoria River district there are several ways in which sorcery may be effected. Most, if not all, of these methods involve manipulation of Dreaming power. Just as the power of the Dreaming can be released accidentally through damage to a Dreaming site, or released intentionally to increase the populations of natural species; it can also be released intentionally as a means of doing harm.

Perhaps the most basic sorcery technique is for people to sing songs with an intended victim in mind. Another way is magically or physically to insert an object into the victim while he or she is asleep. The victim, unaware of the attack, will then sicken and die over a period of days or weeks. To the best of my knowledge, neither of these methods involves Dreaming power in any overt way.

A more elaborate method that clearly involves Dreaming power is the use of a modelled image. During field work for the Jasper Gorge/Kidman Springs land claim, Alan young recounted a particularly well-known incident which would have occurred in the late 1920's or early 1930's; the men involved are now deceased. According to the story, a Karangpurru man named Old Charcoal had his young wife 'stolen' by a Ngaliwurru man named Jabiru. Charcoal sought revenge on Jabiru with the aid of the Mulukurr ('devils' dog') Dreaming. To do this he first made a model of Mulukurr from grass, gave it stones for eyes and sharp sticks for teeth, and then 'sang' life into it. The wife-stealer, Jabiru, found himself pursued by the Mulukurr and flanked by two 'devils'. Fortunately for Jabiru, he was an accomplished runner

who managed to run several miles and escape by diving into the Victoria River. Charcoal did not get his wife back.

The form of sorcery which is of particular interest here involves the creation of art at sites where the resident Dreaming is known to have power especially efficient for sorcery purposes. Most commonly the art produced for this purpose takes the form of painted rock art. From examples identified by Aborigines as sorcery art it would seem that almost any Dreaming site may be used for this purpose. Sun, Black-headed Python, Sugarbag Bee, Rainbow Snake, Grasshopper, Boil and 'Bad Cold' Dreamings have been mentioned in this context, but there are specific Dreaming sites renowned for their potency in acts of sorcery.

I have visited one of these sites, a Dreaming place for an unidentified fish species at Seale Gorge near Daguragu (see Map 2). At the time of my visit I understood my informants to be calling this site a 'saw fish' Dreaming. This was somewhat puzzling because none of the paintings of fish at the site resembled an estuarine sawfish (Plate 118). I have since learned of a small fish species that nibbles at loose flesh around any sores on people who enter waterholes, and it seems likely that my informants were talking about a 'sore' fish. Informants state that to initiate sorcery a person can go to this site and paint an image of the intended victim or victims on the rocks. The remains of a number of such paintings can still be seen there (eg Figure 67). While painting the image, the artist calls the name of the intended victim. Soon after, the power of the Dreaming fish begins to take effect, and the sorcerised person becomes sick. Within a few weeks the victim will have lost so much weight and strength that death is imminent.

Informants also state that drawings of human figures (paintings or carvings) can be applied to objects such as boomerangs or didgeridoos. Such objects are then left at appropriate sites where the Dreaming power will be released against the victim.

Sorcery can also be initiated by carving an image of the victim into certain Dreaming trees. Trees with carved motifs were seen in the region by explorers (see Baines's illustration in Birman

1979: plate 15), and have been illustrated by Willshire (1896: 82), Basedow (1925: 352, figure 52) and Dahl (1926: 181 figure 5), but it is unknown whether any of these were motivated by sorcery. Today, trees with Aboriginal pictures of any kind are all but absent. European graffiti, however, is common, particularly on boab trees. If a Dreaming tree is marked, Aboriginal custodians say that the perpetrators will have endangered themselves.

Neutralising Sorcery

People who have been made 'clever' can remove foreign objects from the body of a sorcery victim, or by other means attempt to remove the effects of sorcery. This is still being done today. In 1989 a Bilinara man showed me a piece of bone, sharpened at each end, which he said had been removed from his stomach by an Aboriginal 'doctor'.

Where sorcery has been initiated via rock painting or tree carving, the sorcery process may be stopped by someone going to the site and 'washing out' the image. Many of the sorcery paintings at Seale Gorge have been washed out through being smeared with what appears to be a mud slurry. This neutralisation does not have to be done by a 'clever' person or by the instigator of the sorcery.

Although I have not seen the creation or neutralising of sorcery-motivated rock paintings, in 1986 I witnessed the discovery and subsequent removal of a human figure carved into the bark of a boab tree (see Figure 110). This particular tree is a Black-headed Python Dreaming - one of the Dreamings especially noted for its potency in sorcery.

When the carving was first noticed by the Aborigines they were unsure of its origin. In their opinion, it could have been made either by an unknown Aboriginal for sorcery purposes or by an unknown European who was 'just mucking about'. The only way to resolve this uncertainty was to wait and see if anyone was sick, or became sick, who had also in some way inspired the hatred of someone with access to this Dreaming. Consequently, nothing

was done about the picture at that time. However, several months later my informants told me that a Warlpiri man who had 'run off with the wife of an old Ngarinman man from Yarralin had subsequently suffered a long illness.

According to my informants, the father of the Warlpiri man suggested that there 'might be drawing la bottle tree'. There was also an alternative suggestion that the drawing might have been the cause of the death of a middle-aged Ngarinman man who had died in distressing circumstances at Yarralin in 1985. I believe that the Warlpiri man was eventually determined to be the victim of this sorcery drawing although this was not made totally clear.

In any case, I was again present, in September 1986, when the carved figure was neutralised. This was accomplished by Alan Young, one of the men who had originally discovered the picture, and who is a traditional owner of the site. Alan first scraped away the carved image with a tyre lever, and then rubbed the damaged bark with kangaroo fat (Plate 119). During the entire process he spoke to the Dreaming, telling it to 'let that man go now, it's finished'.

Such attempts are not always successful, and if the sorcery victim does die, sorcery may in turn be used to achieve retribution. This form of sorcery does not involve art. To avenge sorcery deaths, articles of clothing or other personal effects of the dead person may be set on fire and placed in holes in the rocks at certain Snake Dreaming places. One well known place where this can be done is a site on the track of Jurntakal, the Death Adder Dreaming. When the burning clothes are deposited the Dreaming is said to then rise from the hole in the form of smoke and to travel unerringly to the killer to deliver fatal retribution.

Time

Up to a point, Victoria River Aboriginal people's concepts of time can be roughly correlated with European notions of prehistory and history. The greatest congruence is found in the idea of history. Aborigines who lived and worked on company-owned

cattle stations (in particular, Wave Hill and Victoria River Downs) conceptualise history as a series of consecutive events or periods, marked by specific types of social relationships. They remember the places where their ancestors were shot, the names of all the station managers, the shocking working conditions, the strike, and so on, and there is a very close agreement between European documentation and Aboriginal remembrance. In contrast, the Aboriginal concept of the time *before* history is fundamentally different from the 'prehistory' of European thinking, although there are some superficial similarities. European concepts of time need no explanation here. However, understanding Aboriginal concepts of time is crucial to an understanding of how Aborigines understand what Europeans call 'rock art'. These concepts are outlined below.

Sequence and Synchrony

Victoria River Aborigines conceptualise two 'time' periods. In one period, events are construed sequentially. As I have explained above, this period of consecutive events is the time experienced by ordinary people today; it is 'ordinary time', and corresponds, more or less, with the European concept of history.

The change from history to prehistory, in the European sense, is determined by the earliest written document in any given area. In contrast, the interface between 'Dreaming' and 'ordinary' is determined by the limits of human memory. Events that occurred or people who lived in the period beyond human memory are Dreaming. Thus non-Dreaming or 'ordinary' time, the time of present-day humans and of the present 'fixed' reality, is in the order of one hundred years. As 'time' passes the temporal boundary between Dreaming and 'ordinary' also advances.

For the most part, the events and people of ordinary time are swallowed up and forgotten as time passes. The visible signs of previous existence - stone flakes, stone arrangements, rock art and so on - become signs of Dreaming activity, the 'prehistory' of Europeans. Europeans conceive of 'prehistoric' time in the same way as they conceive historic time, that is, as a period of

sequential events. This is where Aboriginal and European concepts radically differ. For Victoria River Aborigines, like Aborigines in many regions elsewhere, the Dreaming has no time - it is the enduring moment of creation in which all events and all actors were contemporaneous.

An example of this concept in action has been reported by Swain (1988: 452-453) who worked among Warlpiri people, south of the Victoria River district. Curious to test their knowledge of biblical events, Swain put a question to a group of elderly Christianised Warlpiri men: who had lived first - Adam, Moses or Jesus? Their reply was that they all lived on the 'one day'. They further suggested that they may all have lived somewhere in the Tanami desert. Swain concludes that Warlpiri Christians are transforming biblical concepts of time into Aboriginal concepts of space (see Males 1989 and Rappaport 1989 for analogous concepts and processes among North American Pueblo Indians and South American Paez peasants respectively).

Although the period of creation has now passed, Dreaming beings and Dreaming power still exists in the world. While most of these beings are believed to be generally immobile, they still can influence the ordinary world of their own volition. Unusual events are generally interpreted as the presence of a Dreaming being or the result of Dreaming activity. Such events may include unusual animal behaviour, unseasonal weather, damage to the 'natural' environment, or the appearance of 'new' images on rocks.

The fundamental difference between Aboriginal and European concepts of the time 'before history' are clear. Aboriginal 'prehistory' is timeless and events are synchronous, set in a spatial framework. European prehistory is potentially datable and events are consecutive, set in a temporal framework. The similarities between the two concepts are as follows:

In the Victoria River district, European 'history' and Aboriginal 'ordinary time' are both of the order of one hundred years. Furthermore, European prehistory and Aboriginal Dreaming both seek to explain signs of human existence in the period before documents or human memory.

Europeans recognise some relics as 'historical'; they were recorded in use in historic times. Relics not so documented are usually considered 'prehistoric'. They are explained as the results of past human activity and Europeans seek to organise them into consecutive events or periods.

Aborigines also recognise some relics as identical to those they know were used by their immediate forebears or by themselves. They explain these as the product of ordinary human beings. They explain other relics as the result of Dreaming presence, but do not seek to organise them into relative time sequence; they are all Dreaming. Some relics identified as of Dreaming origin are regarded as the presence of particular Dreamings, or the result of their actions, belonging to particular places. Other Dreaming relics are not seen to be localised in this way.

An example of a location-specific Dreaming explanation, and of the difference between European and Aboriginal explanations for the same 'prehistoric/Dreaming' relic, are two standing stones in Ngarinman country. The prehistorian sees them as stone arrangements and concludes that human beings arranged them. Ngarinman people say they are the 'whiskers' of the Rainbow snake that lives in the area and which can be seen as a painting in a nearby rock shelter.

An example of a generalised 'Dreaming' explanation is the small bifacial points (1-3 cm) found in surface scatters throughout the Victoria River region. From a European perspective, such points are a possible indication of an earlier stone industry, and were probably used as spear points or barbs. Aborigines also believe that these points were used on spears, but they say they were made in the Dreaming by either the 'Blanket Lizard' (frill-necked lizard) Dreaming, or by 'little people'. The location of these points is not linked to 'Blanket Lizard' Dreaming sites. Rather, Blanket Lizard origin is a widespread explanation for the Dreaming origin of the artefacts. Wardaman people offered Davidson (1935: 161) a similar explanation for bifacial points he found in the base levels of his excavations.

Time and Art

The fundamental difference between Aboriginal and European perspectives on time has a crucial bearing on Aboriginal and European understandings of rock art. From an Aboriginal view, the accumulated evidence of life on earth prior to the present and immediate (known) past, is attributed to Dreaming activity.

On one occasion I asked Barry Young about paintings from Jililijawun (Figures 108, 109). He said: '...they only bin just drawing the shape and the, all this fish now, but old people was there in the bush all the time. They always bin draw 'im this you know.' I then asked him if the old people he was referring to were his immediate ancestors or Dreaming, to which he replied, 'yes, Dreaming people'. On another occasion, when Alan Young said that a painting was 'just a drawing', I asked him, 'You reckon just a drawing?'. To this he replied, 'Yeah. Dreaming bin put 'im. No more, no more these people.' (ie not ordinary human beings).

Another aspect to this issue concerns different interpretations given for the same motif. For example, Barry Young described many paintings from Gordon Creek as being 'just a drawing', but Alan Young, Old Tim, and Daly Pulkara declared that most of the same paintings were Dreaming, and gave interpretations based on their knowledge of men's secret ritual. From the varying responses as to the origin of the art there can be no doubt that, with the exception of contact art, *all motifs can* be interpreted as being of Dreaming origin. Even sorcery art, usually stated to be the work of ordinary human beings, can also be attributed to the activity of Dreaming beings.

Culture and Knowledge

The world view of the Victoria River district Aborigines is based on an underlying assumption that the cosmos is an integrated whole of which human beings are a part. The assumption of inter-relatedness is integral to Aboriginal peoples' interpretation of the world. It also facilitates the interpretation of rock art, because, working from this assumption, any collection of motifs is

assumed to have a relationship which people can discover. Inter-relatedness is also integral to the Dreaming creation of the world.

In this system people are not regarded as more important than other species. Indeed, all species are believed to possess ceremony, language, law, and to bear responsibilities for the maintenance of the cosmic system. In other words, according to Victoria River Aborigines, all species have culture.

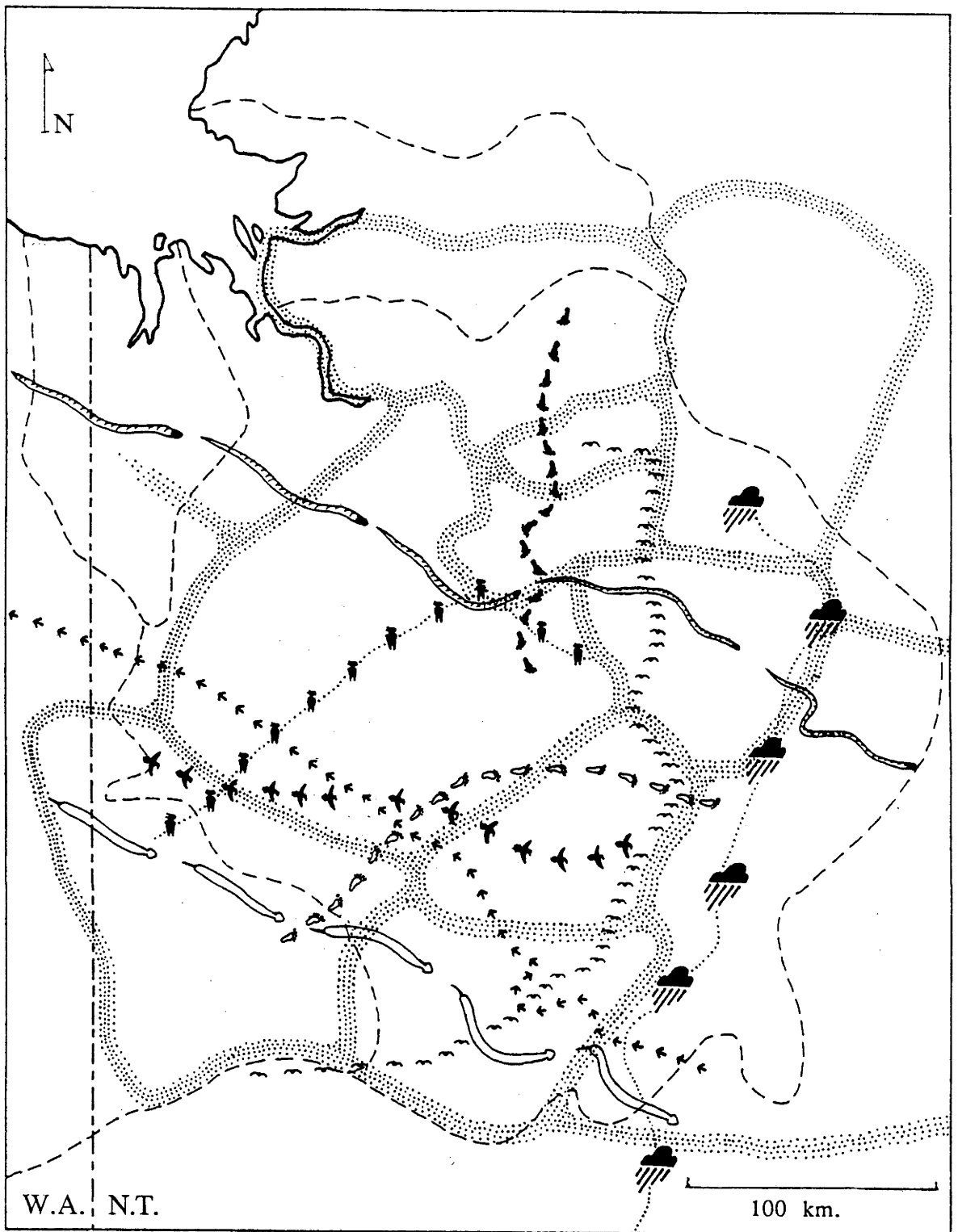
Aspects of the culture of some animals are known. For example, brolgas are seen dancing in the bush and their red head is regarded as body decoration, equivalent to the red ochre used in any Aboriginal ceremony. For many species nothing explicit is known, but that the animals concerned possess culture is unquestioned. They behave in predictable ways and clearly communicate with each other. All Dreamings, all the Creative Beings walked or had the potential to walk in human form. The knowledge that Dreamings could change shape is integral to Aboriginal peoples' interpretations of rock art, as I will discuss in Chapters 9 and 10.

Although the Dreaming beings are now 'fixed' in the landscape, they are still present and retain their original power. This power may be released deliberately or by accident with, depending upon the particular Dreaming involved, potentially devastating results for the immediate region or the world at large. In addition, Dreaming beings sometimes performed gender-specific actions or left gender-specific bodily secretions at sites. As a result, these sites now contain power that is inimical to members of the opposite sex.




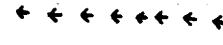
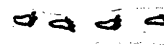
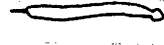


Although it is public knowledge that localised Dreamings interacted with each other, an explicit public connection between Dreamings that travel long distances and those that are localised is uncommon. In most cases, the travelling Dreamings are said only to have seen or heard the localised Dreamings at a distance, and to have continued their travels, sometimes altering their course to avoid direct contact. Alternatively, localised Dreamings saw travelling Dreamings from a distance and withdrew.

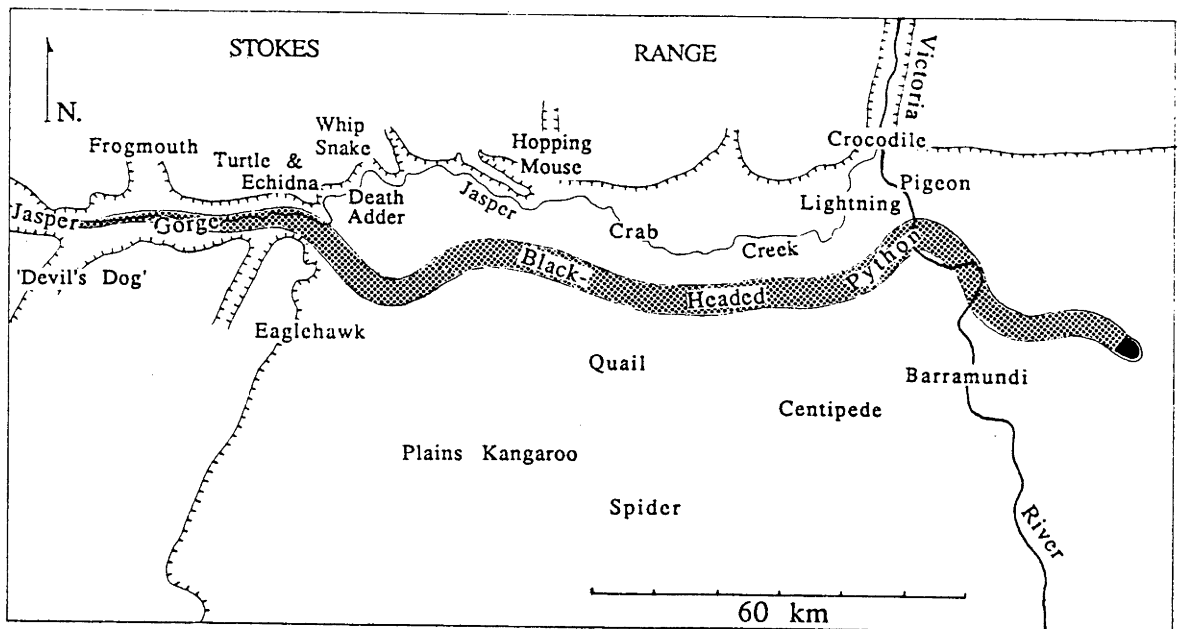
However, I have learned that in most, if not in all, instances the two classes of Dreamings do in fact have some sort of interaction. Connections within or between each class of Dreamings are more often apparent in esoteric knowledge, restricted to men's (and I presume women's) secret ritual. In the case of some of the most important secret rituals, the Dreaming beings and actions to which the rituals refer have almost no public counterparts. Thus, at a public level, many of the travelling Dreamings and localised Dreamings appear to form more or less separate systems. It is only in the domain of esoteric knowledge that all the Dreamings come together in an integrated network.

Access to the realm of esoteric knowledge begins around the age of puberty, and continues throughout an individual's life. In very old age, men and women are said to learn each others secret ritual or 'business', so a complete understanding of cosmos is the preserve of the elderly. As a sympathetic European with a long-term relationship to people in the region, I have been privileged with information not normally revealed to a male of my age group. However, I have reason to believe that there are further levels of knowledge whose very existence is a secret closely guarded from Europeans.



Map 5: A selection of some of the major travelling Dreamings in the Victoria River valley.

-  Black-headed Python (Walujapi).
-  Male Children (Karu).
-  Flying Fox (Warpa).
-  Emu (Yiparatur).
-  Nanganarri Women.
-  Death Adder (Jurntakal).
-  Pigeon (Yawalwal).
-  Rain.



Map 6: The track of Walujapi, the Black-headed Python, between Jasper Gorge and the Victoria River.

7 DREAMING GEOGRAPHY

Introduction

Knowledge of the Dreaming beings, their role in creating the world, and their relationship to each other and to human beings, encoded in ritual or expressed in day to day life, is fixed in the landscape and is learned and transmitted by succeeding generations of responsible adults. Thus, the Dreamings established fixed points of reference in the physical, spiritual and social landscapes.

A problem commonly encountered by people researching prehistoric rock art is how to interpret spatial patterns that might be evident. In the Victoria River district the opportunity exists to compare spatial patterns in the art with the spatial/social organisation of people.

Social-Geographical Units

Dreaming geography is comprised of units of sites such that smaller units are contained within larger units. Land claims in the Victoria River district provide the basis for much that is known of social-geographical units. Language-defined social groups have been given prominence in Aboriginal claims to land. Detailed studies of these social-geographical areas have been made of Gurindji (McConvell and Hagen 1981), Mudbura (McConvell and Palmer 1979), Bilinara (Rose and Lewis 1989), Ngaliwurru and Karangpurru (Rose and Lewis 1986; Woods *et al* 1989), Nungali (Bauman *et al* 1984), and Ngarinman (Palmer and Brady 1987).

In all of these claims to land a similar pattern is evident. Country is demarcated into small areas defined by localised Dreamings ('family areas' in Rose's terminology). Gurindji, Mudbura, and some Ngarinman people define areas by reference to subsections ('skin areas' by Rose's terminology, 'clan areas' in McConvell's).

Language defined areas accommodate a number of smaller units and are usually quite clearly defined.

The drastic population loss and the destruction of traditional use of land have produced a situation in which some units have virtually disappeared. Bilinara people, for instance, define themselves as all Bilinara, all co-owners of Bilinara country, and do not further differentiate themselves with respect to country. The same is true of Karangpurru people. It seems clear that both Bilinara and Karangpurru people formerly recognised smaller units; probably their internal differentiation was similar to the pattern found among their neighbours. However, at this time it is impossible to reconstruct smaller units, and in the face of people's efforts to amalgamate in order to survive as a social and cultural group, it could be insensitive to attempt to undermine their sense of unity by attempting to probe the vestiges of former difference.

Unlike many Aboriginal societies in which patrilineal identity is the major means of defining a person's rights and responsibilities, most Victoria River people inherit rights and responsibilities from both their mother and their father. Identity and consequent rights and responsibilities are not confined to single units (however those units may be defined) but rather are spread across at least two units.

Family Areas

Family areas are defined by the presence of a particular localised Dreaming or set of Dreamings, the Kuning or fathers' Dreaming (Kuning - common to Victoria River languages). Rights and responsibilities to Kuning are inherited by both men and women, but are only formally transmitted by men: a man transmits the esoteric knowledge and rights relating to these Dreamings to his son and his sisters' son during young men's initiation. This knowledge includes the right to use particular body designs that are revealed to the initiate during the ceremony.

Although Aborigines usually refer to one named being as 'my Kuning', in many (probably all) cases a small constellation of interrelated beings is involved. For example, a number of Ngaliwurru people consistently refer to their Kuning as Mulukurr, the 'devils' dog', but the Dreaming beings that interacted with each other and that have sites within that local area include crow and Kaya ('devil'). Each person whose Dreaming is Mulukurr has rights and responsibilities to all of the sites within that area, including the right to paint body designs for all of the Dreaming beings in that area.

Skin Areas

Skin areas are made up of a group of family areas. They are called skin areas because, as certain travelling Dreamings moved across the land, they changed their skin (subsection identity) at regular intervals. From the point at which the Dreaming being changed to a particular skin category, the land is regarded as being of that skin until the Dreaming being changed to another skin category. This process repeats along the length of the Dreaming track so that consecutive areas have their own skin classification.

Members of family areas within a skin area share this identity, and function as clans. Although some older Victoria River people can define the geographical extent of some skin areas, the classification seems to have very little importance at the present time. It is possible that this social-geographic category had been adopted shortly before European contact and had not had sufficient time to become fully integrated into Victoria River society. Alternatively, it may have lapsed due to population loss.

Language Areas

Like skin areas, language areas are usually defined by a travelling Dreaming. At particular points along their tracks certain of the travelling Dreamings changed the language they spoke; as a general rule, the areas between these points are language areas. Men and women are associated with travelling Dreamings, and

with particular language areas, because the travelling Dreamings interacted with the localised Dreamings they encountered as they moved across the country.

For example, Walujapi, the Black-headed Python changed her language from Ngaliwurru to Karangpurru at a place named Kaljaki, and then continued travelling to the east. Between Kaljaki and the Victoria River she saw or interacted with Eaglehawk, Turtle, Hopping Mouse, Crab, Quail, Spider, Plains Kangaroo, Centipede, Lightning, Crocodile Pigeon and Barramundi (Map 6).

It is important to note that even though language is a major feature distinguishing one group from another, the same travelling Dreaming being defines language area after language area along its line of travel; the members of each language area share identity with the same travelling Dreaming. They also share rights and responsibilities for sites, songs and ritual associated with that Dreaming being, and say that they are 'company' for each other in these rights.

Environmentally Defined Areas

Victoria River people use the terms 'desert country', 'big river country', and 'saltwater country' to categorise people on a regional basis. Each term relates to an ecological zone largely determined by rainfall; the zones are oriented more or less east-west. In the Victoria River valley the division between the big river country and the saltwater country is loosely defined by the Stokes Range. This range begins near the Victoria River Gorge in the east, and runs south-west to the watershed of the East Baines and Humbert Rivers. The range appears to act as a barrier to rainfall such that average rainfall to the north is almost twice that to the south, with consequent floristic and faunal differences (Map 3).

On the western side of the Victoria River Valley the big river/salt water division appears to be loosely defined by the Pinkerton Range (Map 3). This range begins on the Victoria River opposite Angalarri Creek and runs west-south-west to the Keep River

headwaters. Again, there are marked floristic differences between the combined West and East Baines River valley to the south, and the range country to the north. In other words, the ranges act as biological as well as geographical markers.

In cultural terms, the environmentally-defined areas were not explicitly defined by Dreaming beings, but the action of certain Dreamings is seen to explain some of the environmental differences between each zone. For example, one Aboriginal myth relates how Yawalwal, the pigeon, carried grindstones on its head from the desert fringe, north-east and north to Yanturi, on the lower Victoria River (Map 2;). At intervals pieces of sandstone fell from the pigeon's head, creating the sandstone outcrops scattered along its route. At Yanturi, near Coolibah Station homestead, the pigeon threw the last slab into the river, creating a major rock bar which informants say 'stops the salt water there' (Plate 120; see Chapter 2).

I asked one old man if grindstones were traded north from the desert and he told me that they were not items in the Winan trade system. It therefore seems likely that the myth defines the origin and distribution of seed grinding technology. Archaeological remains tend to support this interpretation; I have recorded upper and lower millstones of the elongated groove, seed-grinding type south of Yanturi, but not further to the north.

There are well recognised cultural differences that distinguish the people in each zone. For instance, there are three types of ceremony for the first stage of male initiation, each associated with an environmental zone. Each ritual complex has a different Dreaming origin, and has different organisation, songs, body designs and dance.

The cultural boundary and the bio-geographical boundary between the saltwater country and the big river country does not correspond exactly. For example, the big river/saltwater division coincides with different language families. Ngarinman, Karangpurru, and languages spoken to the south belong to the Paman-Nyungan language family and are in the big river country. Ngaliwurru, Nungali and Jaminjung are in the Djaminjungan

language family while Kajerong and Miriwung are in the Miriwungic language family; both language families are in the saltwater country. However, it should be noted that Ngarinman language area straddles the ranges which provide the biogeographical boundary between the two zones; eastern Ngarinman are unquestionably part of the big river country while the western Ngarinman have tidal reaches of the East Baines and Victoria River within their territory. To a lesser degree, this is also the case for Ngaliwurru country.

Dreamings, marriage, and trade transcend and interconnect each zone and through marriage or inheritance an individual may have rights to both saltwater country and big river country.

Boundaries

There are two main points here which make it impossible to assign single identities. One difficulty lies in the Aboriginal concept of 'boundary'. The other is that group identity is highly flexible, and that the basis of difference in one context may be the basis of similarity in another. Before any correlations can be attempted, Aboriginal concepts of 'boundary' and 'identity' must be understood.

Rose (1984) devotes a chapter of her doctoral thesis to the question of 'boundaries' in the Victoria River district. She found that there are 'levels of inclusion' from smaller to larger socio-geographical units, and while western-style boundaries can be drawn to identify and separate the geographical extent of different units of social organisation, Aborigines themselves do not think of their identity or their land as being bounded in this way. Rather, they think of their relationship to different socio-geographic units on the basis of their relationship to Dreaming beings and the sites where those Dreamings were active in the landscape. Dreaming maps, like desert acrylics, are connections between places. When thinking about the spatial relationships of different social groups, an imagery of networks is far more suitable than an imagery of bounded territories.

Networks

Each Victoria River Aboriginal person is the centre of a series of interconnecting networks. One of these networks is constituted by trade relationships between neighbouring groups. Another is formed through affinal and kinship ties and the third consists of travelling and localised Dreamings.

Trade Links

Ceremony, marriage and trade are not really separate systems, but trade can be traced far more extensively so I will deal with trade as a separate topic here. In pre-contact times a rich array of goods were passed from region to region via a complex network of trade relationships, known as *Winan*. Bundles of boomerangs (plain and hooked), fighting picks and stone knife blades, cakes of kaolin clay, and cakes of fine red ochre from a quarry on Banka Banka Station came from the south-east and were traded north and west (Map 1). Softwood shields and coolamons, balls of hair string, cakes of spinifex resin, and desert spears came out of the inland desert to be passed on to the north.

Out of the west came incised pearl shell ornaments, to be sent south-east, and northwards. Bundles of bamboo spear shafts, 'bullet' or 'goose' spears, mangrove-tipped spears, and cylindrical spearthrowers came from the saltwater country of Port Keats and Daly River, to continue south-east, south, south-west and west. From the Victoria River valley itself, large stone 'leilira' blades were quarried and fixed to bamboo spearshafts before being traded to the south and south-east. In addition to material goods, information in the form of ceremonies - song, dance, and body designs - were also traded.

Many of these trade items bore artworks which might have influenced local art styles, although there is no clear evidence that this happened in the Victoria River district. Some of these exotic goods influenced the content of rock art in as much as

traded items are sometimes depicted in the art (eg see Plates 42, 62).

At the present time in the Victoria River valley, an abbreviated form of the traditional trade system is still in operation. Boomerangs, bamboo spear-shafts (Plate 121) and, occasionally, mangrove-tipped spears, bullet spears, ochre cakes and pearl shells still move along the Winan trade routes. Non-sacred ceremonies, revealed to an individual by a Dreaming being while the individual is asleep, are also legitimate trade items. Sacred objects are still regularly traded in the context of gender-restricted ritual.

Exactly how this system operated prior to European settlement is difficult to determine. According to one Aboriginal informant, trade goods traditionally followed a convoluted route from group to group across the landscape. Mathews (1901: 83-84) states that Victoria River people made periodic journeys over long distances for trade purposes:

the natives of the Upper Victoria travel eastwards to Newcastle Waters; thence northerly to Daly Waters, Birdum Creek and Katherine River, returning by way of Delemere and Gregory Creek. Residents of the Wickham River go westward to the Negri and Ord Rivers, which they run down a long way, coming back by Auvergne on the Baines, and thence up the Victoria River home...the journeys... are marked by good feeling and festive corroborees throughout'.(see maps 1, 2 and 3)

These days, goods are moved equivalent distances by motor vehicle or, on rare occasion, by aeroplane.

Marriage Links

Among Aboriginal people, marriage is a relationship between groups and countries; it must take place across a boundary of difference. Marriages are group concerns, for the issue is that of establishing relationships which will (people hope) carry on to future generations. In the Victoria River district marriages are

arranged by adults; the practice is said to be 'traditional'. Girls are promised before puberty by their father and by their mother's brother; the husband to be is usually considerably older than the promised girl, often in his thirties. The husband is obliged to go and live with the family of his promised wife in their country. When his wife is fully mature he has the right to take her to live in his own country. During this period of bride-service he works for her family and learns about the sacred places, designs, and objects which belong to that country. When his wife goes to live in his country, she in turn learns about his country.

Husband and wife (and through them their close relations) have rights to each others' country. This does not constitute ownership, but gives them occupation, travelling, and hunting rights.

It is reasonable to hypothesize that prior to invasion, when the population was much more dense, marriages were likely to be arranged within a fairly restricted geographical sphere. At this time, however, marriages are often arranged between communities one hundred kilometres or more distant. Although marriages are now more extensive than they may once have been, the patterns seem to have remained stable.

The boundaries of difference across which a marriage is arranged can be that of family area, language area, and environmental zone. Within any given family, marriages will be contracted to different countries, thus extending the families' ties in numerous directions. In addition, some men have two or three wives and the women need not be from the same country.

While ownership rights are inherited from one's parents, individuals have access to numerous countries beyond those of their mother and father. Father's wife's country (the country of their half-siblings), spouse's country, and siblings's spouse's country are all countries in which people have rights to visit, live, and learn.

In return for receiving a wife a man must work for his in-laws, and when the time comes he must put his brother-in-law (wife's

brother) through initiation. Initiation takes place in the country of the novice. If the two families come from different ecological zones, the initiation ritual from one zone will be performed in the other, but at the very least these countries/groups will be involved: novice's father's country, novice's mother's country, novice's brother-in-law's country. At the completion of the initiation ceremony, the initiate is taken on an extended trip through his brother-in-law's country, thus teaching him about country with which he has a relationship through his sister, and from which he will eventually receive a wife.

By promising a wife, one country loses a member to another country. Eventually, this imbalance will be redressed when the receiving group gives a wife in return. Marriage arrangements thus create new networks of relationships between people and countries.

Dreaming Links

Through inherited affiliations to localised Dreamings, groups of people share identity with each other, with particular plants, animals or natural phenomena, and with particular tracts of country. Localised Dreaming-identified groups located within a particular 'skin country' share a common identity with that country. Each localised Dreaming-identified person and group is related to similar individuals and groups through a common relationship to a travelling Dreaming. Travelling Dreamings, as I have described above, regularly changed their skin category or language, creating major features of the social as well as the physical landscape.

As a general rule, all people whose country is within the area where a travelling Dreaming spoke a particular language identify with that area and that language. People who identify with a language area defined by a travelling Dreaming share rights and responsibilities for the sites, songs, designs, and knowledge associated with that Dreaming. People in all the language areas defined by a particular Dreaming share a common identity with that Dreaming; all have a common concern that the sites for that

Dreaming are looked after by the respective custodians in each language area, and that songs and designs associated with that Dreaming being are not usurped. Of course, more than one travelling Dreaming passed through any given language area so that each language-identified area is associated with a unique set of other language areas.

Kinship Links

Each person is born with established kinship links; an extended family that includes members of a number of different countries and will almost certainly include different language areas. On the basis of evidence presented in land claims it appears that there are some differences among Victoria River valley people concerning patrilineal and matrilineal rights to land. Gurindji (McConvell and Hagen 1981) and Mudbura (McConvell and Palmer 1979) people appear to emphasise patrilineal rights to land. In contrast, Bilinara, Karangpurru, Ngarinman, Ngaliwurru and Nungali people have offered compelling evidence that individuals are traditional owners of both their mother's and father's countries. Their evidence has been accepted by the Aboriginal Land Commissioners, Maurice J. and Olney J.

A system of inheritance in which an individual inherits rights from two people and marries a person who also has dual rights, and in which the next generation inherits their parents' rights has the capacity to generate unworkable bundles of rights within a few generations. Victoria River people have developed a number of strategies to prevent such a burdensome accumulation (Lewis and Rose 1988: 50-51). The important point in considering how boundaries are transcended is that every person has multiple rights to countries and thus has rights and responsibilities which are geographically extensive.

Ritual Communities

It seems certain that some Victoria River rituals no longer survive and it is known that some, such as mortuary rituals, have been

highly modified since European settlement. The concern here is with those rituals which draw people together from numerous countries and environmental zones. The principal ones are 'young men's business', Big Sunday or Kajiri, and women's business. I will not discuss women's business other than to note that it involves women from the same area as does men's business.

'Young men's business' is the first stage of male initiation. Among 'saltwater' people the ceremony involved in young men's initiation is called Wangka, among 'big river' people it is called Pandimi, and among 'desert' people it is called Yalaju. Each ceremony has different songs, musical styles, styles of dance and body decoration, and organisation of time (Plates 122, 123).

A boy is initiated in his own country by his brother-in-law; if his brother-in-law comes from a different ecological zone, the boy will be initiated within the ritual complex from that zone. The brother-in-law brings with him his own relations (often quite broadly defined) and this group of visitors performs music and dance, and shows some designs and objects to the host group. They also see some of the designs and objects of the host group. In this way visual information is shared extensively.

During one year at Yarralin, for example, three boys were put through initiation. One was initiated by Mudbura men who came, along with numerous relations, from Newcastle Waters (Map 1). Another was initiated by Gurindji men from Daguragu, and the third by Nungali/Ngaliwurru men from Timber Creek.

Every initiation event is restricted in numbers of countries and personnel, but taken together these events draw people throughout the valley into a network of reciprocal obligations, events, and shared knowledge. One of the major results of this ritual activity is that communication networks between groups are sustained.

While young men's business focuses on the relationship between a limited number of groups, Kajiri or 'Big Sunday' is focussed on the region as a whole. In this ritual groups of males who have previously been made into young men are elevated to the status of

fully initiated men, thus becoming eligible for marriage and access to more restricted domains of knowledge.

'Big Sunday' ritual is based on the network of travelling Dreamings and associated localised Dreamings. A major portion of Victoria River societies are brought together as a ritual community through 'Big Sunday'. At the present time, Big Sunday rituals are held at residential communities where people with rights to a number of language groups are centred. Through the vagaries of history, not every language territory has a residential community. For instance, there are no residential communities in Malngin country, Karangpurru country, or Jaminjung country. It seems probable that before people became settled in permanent communities, Big Sunday rituals were held in each language-defined territory.

With respect to the social 'catchment' of such events, in the Victoria River valley, the Big Sunday ritual events that I have documented have been attended by members of virtually all Victoria River language groups. The Dreaming tracks that link these groups are focussed on a particular site in Bilinara country (dealt with in detail in Chapter 11), and the groups so linked constitute a regional ritual community, identifying strongly with the Bilinara site.

Groups within this ritual community are not isolated from groups further afield. For instance, Jimmy Manngayarri told me about participants in a ritual gathering in about 1920 on the upper Ord River near the old Limbunya homestead (Malngin country: see Maps 2 and 3) According to Jimmy this gathering included Warlpiri people from the desert, groups from further west in the Ord River valley, and groups from the Victoria River valley whom, it may be assumed, were part of the ritual community focussed on Bilinara.

The interaction of people from widely separated territories is not a recent development related to access to vehicle transport. The report of Mathews (1901: 83-84) that for purposes of trade and ceremony, people from the upper Victoria River travelled south-east to Newcastle Waters and then back to the Victoria River via

Katherine and people from the Wickham River travelled into and along the Ord River valley indicates that Victoria River people were in contact with groups to the east and west far beyond the confines of the Victoria River valley itself.

The significance of the Big Sunday ceremony, and its strong relationship to rock art, will be discussed in detail in Chapter 11.

8 THE TEACHERS

Flexible Identity

While Dreaming sites and tracks are generally considered to be immutable, how people relate to them is a matter of choice. Because people inherit relationships to Dreamings from their parents and grandparents they could, in theory, inherit rights to four different Dreaming/land relationships. In practice, people usually choose to actuate their responsibilities for no more than three countries. It is almost always the rule that the country for which responsibilities are 'dropped' is the father's mothers' country. Quite often, people choose to focus their attention on only two or even just one of their inherited countries, but this does not mean that an individual forfeits his or her rights to these other countries.

A person may identify with a small social-geographical unit, or with a larger unit. Furthermore, depending on the affiliations of each of their four grandparents, a person will have a choice of several localised areas, and often more than one larger category to choose from. In other words, a person may identify as, for example, Bilinara in one context, and as Ngarinman or Malngin in another context.

The degree to which people have options, how they might choose between them, and the complex social mosaic that results from choices that are made, may be seen to have a bearing on the distribution of rock art styles in this region and to have equally important implications for the study of rock art in areas where informants are no longer available.

Each individual has a relationship with more than one Dreaming being, even within one family or minimal area. They have relationships with Dreamings that were of localised influence, and with Dreaming beings that travelled immense distances. Two individuals may share precisely the same set of Dreaming relationships; full siblings share an entire set. More often two people of the same group will have only some Dreaming

relationships in common. Children of the same father but different mothers, for example, will share their father's Dreamings, but not their mother's Dreamings unless the mothers were full sisters. They are both different and the same.

In sum, each individual has multiple rights to country, multiple sets of rights and responsibilities with respect to country, Dreamings, sites, designs, songs, dances, myths, and in the broadest sense, knowledge. Rights to country are based on relationships with localised Dreaming beings, and each localised group is part of numerous networks which ramify across the landscape, linking people into much larger systems.

An examination of the life histories of the men with whom I worked most closely will contextualise the issue of multiple rights to country and the knowledge associated with country. It will also clarify factors of life experience, age, and personal initiative in developing the interpretations I document and analyse.

The social organisation of knowledge depends on the management of information through a gradual process of instruction; individuals learn over the course of a lifetime, with information being transmitted from old to young. Bearing in mind the variations imposed by personal history, intelligence, and interest, old people, by virtue of having lived longer, know more than younger people. Only people who have inherited rights to a particular country have the right to speak for that country, and younger people defer to the authority of older people.

A feature of non-literate cultures is that no single individual knows all parts of that culture's traditions; there are inevitable overlaps and gaps. In addition, differences in personality, age and life experiences may influence the answers to researchers' questions. My experience in recording rock art interpretations is the same as that experienced by Stanner when recording Murinbata mythology. Stanner (1959: 86) found that individual myths varied enormously from person to person, and from the one person in different contexts. He concluded that:

Many circumstances and, doubtless, many motives may have such effects. An informant's forgetfulness, lack of interest, mentality, prejudice and notion of what a questioner wishes to hear, or should be told, may affect the version told.

I sought informants on the basis of their affiliations to either of the two areas where I had recorded the greatest number of art sites, their age and concomitant right to speak on matters relating to country, and their availability at the time. The men who eventually provided most of the information I recorded were Anzac Munganyi, Daly Pulkara, Old Tim Yilngayari, Barry Young Kartija and his brother Alan Young Najukpayi. Details of the country affiliations and life histories of these men are set out below. A number of other men also provided information; I include brief sketches of their personal details and rights to country.

Anzac Munganyi and Hector Wanayarri

The first man I interviewed was Anzac Munganyi (Plates 117, 124) His older brother, Hector Wanayarri (Plate 124), gave some assistance, but was generally unavailable because of work commitments. Because of their similar life histories, I provide details of both men here.

Anzac and Hector were both born on Victoria River Downs, circa 1925-30. Their father was a custodian for both Mudbura and Bilinara country and their mother came from Bilinara country. In addition, they have ties to desert country to the south-west of Bilinara territory. Possibly in response to the near extinction of male Bilinara custodians, Anzac and Hector have chosen to place greater emphasis on their role as custodians for Bilinara country than for Mudbura country. They are now recognised as senior custodians for Bilinara land, particularly the eastern half of the Bilinara area.

Both men have spent virtually their entire lives living at Pigeon Hole outstation. Dry seasons saw them on horseback, working as stockmen throughout the surrounding area. During the wet

season lay-off, they walked through the bush to other station centres, visiting relations and fulfilling ceremonial obligations. As stockmen and 'bush blackfellows', they had ample opportunity to learn traditional bush skills, and the history and Dreaming significance of both Bilinara and Mudbura country.

On their way to and from Mount Sanford outstation, both men have walked through the Bilimatjaru (Gordon Creek) sandstone many times, sometimes camping in painted rock shelters on the way. Both are active in regional ceremonial life; in the wet season of 1983/4, they helped lead a large group of young men on a walk through the Bilimatjaru sandstone for ceremonial purposes.

The life histories of both Anzac and Hector, and their continuing active involvement in regional ceremonial life, indicates that each is sufficiently well versed in traditional knowledge to have excellent potential as informants for Bilinara country. Indeed, their status is unanimously recognised and acknowledged by senior custodians of neighbouring language areas.

I first met Anzac and Hector briefly in 1975. Since 1980 I have been in regular contact with them in various contexts; as a guest at both public and restricted ceremony in which both men were involved, helping them to have Bilinara sacred sites registered, visiting historic sites and recording oral history, and working with them on a land claim.

Similar long-term contact with other informants has led to relationships of friendship and trust, and access to areas of information not usually revealed to Europeans. However, during my attempts to elicit interpretations for Bilinara art sites (primarily with Anzac), I gained the distinct impression that in many instances both Anzac and Hector were offering only the most simple public versions of what the various motifs represented, an impression confirmed by the information provided for the same sites in later interviews with other informants. This response was particularly unexpected given that Anzac and Hector had taken me to the most important men's site in Bilinara country, had seen me at a number of ceremonies

restricted to men, and knew that I accepted and respected Aboriginal law and culture.

I can only guess at the reason or reasons for their reluctance to provide more than very basic information. From my knowledge of the two men and of regional history, two possibilities come to mind. On the one hand, it is possible that they had made a decision to keep to themselves the only thing that in their experience Europeans did not understand or want, and could not take by force - knowledge of the Dreaming, particularly the secret levels of knowledge. On the other hand, although outwardly it would appear that their life experiences were much the same as other Aboriginal men in the Victoria River district, the reality may be quite different.

In many ways, the Victoria River district has been a backwater of the Northern Territory. The area is remote and harsh; no missions were ever established and very little scientific research of any kind was carried out in the region until very recent times. In turn, Pigeon Hole, a European outstation of V.R.D. operating under the centralised authority of Victoria Rivers Downs head station, may fairly be described as a backwater of Victoria River Downs. The history of such backwaters has been characterised by brutal and repressive treatment of the Aborigines by local Europeans. Both Anzac and Hector exude an air of friendliness and confidence when dealing with Europeans. However, I believe this to be an effective way of getting along with Europeans, and at the same time masking an underlying fear and dislike of whites, including even those few whites who have consciously attempted to develop relationships of equality and respect.

My suspicion that particularly harsh treatment from Europeans may have created in Anzac and Hector an unwillingness to develop other than superficial relationships with any Europeans was reinforced by an event which occurred in September 1988. At that time Anzac and I were mapping sites to be used as evidence in a claim to land in the Pigeon Hole area.

The attitude of the then owner of Victoria River Downs towards any land claim was such that we had not advised the Pigeon Hole

manager of the purpose of my visit. We anticipated that permission to travel on the station might be refused. We had almost completed the work when the Europeans at Victoria River Downs head station discovered what we were doing, and advised the Pigeon Hole manager of our presence. On our arrival back at the Pigeon Hole 'blacks camp' one afternoon, I received a message that the managers' wife wanted me to come and see her. Anzac immediately became visibly anxious that the white 'missus' might confront us in the camp; he could not be rid of me quickly enough. Anzac suggested that we meet at Yarralin the following day to finalise our work. Although I waited at Yarralin for two days, he never came.

In sum, Hector and Anzac were in a position to teach me far more than they did. Nevertheless, their interpretations of some categories of motifs were in general agreement with other informants views, and their interpretations of other categories provide some insight into the management of knowledge.

Old Tim Yilngayari

Old Tim (Plate 125) was born in the bush about 1907 and passed away in 1988. He spent much of his childhood in his fathers' country, Pukaka, in the Wickham River sandstone (Ngarinman country), and this was the country with which he asserted a deep and intimate relationship. His mother also came from Ngarinman country. For most of his adult life he followed the usual pattern of dry season stockwork and wet season walkabout, but lifelong regular contact with European society seems to have had little effect on him, or at least, little effect on his understanding of the world.

He was, by his own account, one of the last of the old time 'clever men', having been taken to the sky country and given powers by the Lightning people. These powers enabled Old Tim to heal sick people, to see dead peoples' spirits, and to wrestle with the Rainbow snake in waterholes and flood waters. Old Tim said that he had lost these powers in recent years. There was general agreement that he often got things mixed up, but he was still

called upon to assist in situations where special knowledge was required. Only Old Tim could butcher an emu without releasing the darkness that all emus carry in their bodies; it was Old Tim who called back the 'wind' or spirit to the body of an old woman who was dying.

Old Tim and his wife Mary were the last Victoria River people to go 'walkabout'. In 1974, accompanied by a tremendous number of dogs, they set out from Daguragu to walk the eighty-odd miles to Yarralin. For almost a year no trace of them was seen. People began to speculate that Tim's dogs may have become so hungry that they had killed and eaten him! Eventually the couple were found stranded at a bore; Old Tim's knees had failed, so he had made camp and waited for someone to turn up with a motor vehicle. Rather than killing and eating Old Tim, his dogs kept him alive by pulling down cattle near his camp.

Old Tim readily agreed to look at the drawings of rock art I had prepared, and to tell me what he could of their meanings. Much of what he told me was independently confirmed later by Alan Young and Daly Pulkara. Other details he alone gave were logically consistent with myths and verbal descriptions of particular Dreaming beings. The only significant difference of opinion between Old Tim and the other men I interviewed was his conviction that women, children, and uninitiated males could not look at *any* of the art. If Old Tim's opinion^s_λ were correct, either now or in the past, only initiated males could have travelled or camped along many of the watercourses in the Victoria River district.

Alan Young Najukpayi

Alan Young (Plates 119, 126) was uniquely placed to provide information on the rock art from a wide area of Victoria River country. His father was a Karangpurru man who also had a relationship with Wardaman country. His mother came from Pukaka, in Ngarinman country, and his mothers' mother came from the Bilimatjaru sandstone in Bilinara country. Alan therefore has rights to at least three different language areas and he has

maintained a strong interest in each, as well as maintaining secondary rights in Wardaman country. Having rights to three language areas is not unusual; many people are born with similar options, but either through deliberate choice or through circumstances beyond their control, most focus attention on one or two areas, and relinquish their responsibilities for the others.

Alan's keen intelligence and the circumstances of his life have led him to become very knowledgeable about Bilinara, Ngarinman, Karangpurru and Wardaman country. Born on Victoria River Downs in about 1932, Alan spent much of his childhood living in the bush in Karangpurru and Bilinara country. Probably after his initiation as a young man he spent a considerable period living in the Bilimatjaru sandstone in Bilinara country, being schooled in traditional law by his uncles (mother's brothers). Inevitably Alan joined the station workforce and mustered cattle in the areas of Victoria River Downs that formerly were Karangpurru, Bilinara, and Ngarinman country, broadening his traditional knowledge in the process. The usual practice of wet season walkabout also provided Alan with the usual opportunities to live in the bush, learning traditional skills and country.

Not surprisingly, Alan proved to be a wonderful informant. He had a genuine interest in the art that I had recorded and in teaching me what the different motifs represented. At the time that I interviewed Alan his interest was probably heightened because he was playing a key role in the organisation of a forthcoming 'Big Sunday' ritual. In this instance the songs to be sung related to the exploits of Dreaming beings in Bilinara country, the area where I had recorded much of the art.

Daly Pulkara.

Daly Pulkara (Plates 121, 127) is a man who identifies strongly with his Ngarinman warrior forebears. His father's brother speared a white settler and was later tracked down and shot by a police party. Daly himself spent time in the upper Wickham River and Humbert River country with Humbert Tommy, one of the last of the Victoria River Aborigines actively to resist the police, and was

present in 1938 when Tommy fought Mounted Constable Fitzgerald and wounded one of Fitzgerald's trackers.

Born at Humbert River Station homestead about 1924, Daly's mother was Ngaliwurru; his father was Ngarinman and also had rights to Malngin country on Limbunya Station, further to the west. Daly also has a relationship to Bilinara people and country which he was unable to specify genealogically, but which he and others regarded as binding. As well as living in the bush for long periods as a child and young man, and travelling through the bush during the wet season walkabout, Daly worked as a stockman and drover for Humbert River station, helping take cattle as far as Dajarra (western Queensland), and to Alice Springs.

Daly is an intelligent man, knowledgeable in traditional matters, and always interested in displaying this knowledge to Europeans. He was very interested in looking at my sketches of rock art, and in answering my questions about them, although his attention was inclined to wander at times.

Barry Young Kartija

Barry Young (Plate 128) is Alan Young's younger brother, and thus shares Alan's ancestry and country affiliations. For much of his adult life he worked as a stockman on Victoria River Downs. Because of difficulties with European employees at Victoria River Downs, Barry 'went for holiday' in the Bilimatjaru sandstone in Bilinara country, staying there 'for about three years'. He also worked for a period at Humbert River Station.

I found Barry to be interested in my sketches of rock art, and quite willing to answer my questions about them, but he does not appear to have the same depth of knowledge as his older brother. Barry was able to provide some interesting interpretations for some of the motifs, but quite often he was unable to offer more of an explanation than that the motif in question was 'just a draw[ing]' or 'it's nothing'.

It is possible that Barry does not have the intellectual power clearly possessed by his brother Alan Young, or he may have missed being taught by the best teachers. Alternatively, Barry may be an example of the 'little brother syndrome' that I have come across among other Aborigines who are younger brothers. The senior brother learns about his country and law earlier than his younger brother, goes through the various initiation processes sooner, and often seems to bear the main burden of responsibility. It seems that in ritual and in taking care of their country older brothers are dominant over younger brothers, and the younger brothers often do not take as much interest in such matters.

Mululu Bob Pinmaya and Big Mick Kangkinang

Mululu Bob Pinmaya was born in about 1922, of Ngaliwurru parents. He inherited rights to two family areas that incorporate the southern side of Jasper Gorge. He spent most of his adult life working as a stockman at Moolooloo homestead (an outstation of V.R.D.) and as a gardener at Victoria River Downs head station. He moved to Yarralin in 1983, so I did not have an opportunity to get to know him well during my long-term stay at Yarralin.

At various times in the past when I have been carrying out fieldwork at Yarralin, Mululu Bob has been singled out a person with particular knowledge of Ngaliwurru and Karangpurru country, and of Dreamings that pass through these language areas, yet he has usually proved to be a self-effacing informant. Like Anzac Munganyi, Mululu is consistently polite, but appears to maintain a reserve in his dealings with all European Australians, whether well-known to him or otherwise.

I sought information from Mululu Bob with respect to a small number of sites I recorded in Ngaliwurru country, primarily in the Jasper Gorge area. My impression of his responses to many of my questions about rock art was that he was more concerned to satisfy my interest than to provide serious interpretations of the art. Nevertheless, some interpretations provided by Mululu gave

additional insight into methods for identifying different motifs, and confirmed some of the methods used by other informants.

I interviewed Mululu Bob in the company of Big Mick Kangkinang, the senior custodian for Ngaliwurru country (Plate 129). Big Mick was born about 1910 in the Stokes Range, in Ngaliwurru language area. Both his parents were from Ngaliwurru country, and he lived in the bush with his parents until he reached early manhood, at which time he moved to Timber Creek and began to work for Europeans. For a short time Big Mick was employed as a police tracker, and later he spent a long period working as a stockman on Victoria River Downs. He was one of the main leaders of the Victoria River Downs Aborigines when they went on strike in 1970. With the establishment of Yarralin community in 1972, Big Mick spent most of his time living either there or at Kilwi community near Timber Creek.

Among those who knew him, Big Mick was regarded as 'the man who knew everything' about Aboriginal culture. A man of great intelligence and prodigious memory, he was a wonderful and patient teacher. He did indeed have a tremendous store of knowledge, but would readily admit to his ignorance if he did not know the answer to a question. Unfortunately, by the time that I first met him in 1977 he was almost totally blind from trachoma. In spite of this major handicap, he showed great interest in the art I had recorded in Jasper Gorge. As Mululu Bob identified each motif, Big Mick confirmed his information and added details of mythology.

Understandably, because of his physical handicap, Big Mick's contribution to my understanding of the art was more in the area of mythology, and in general understandings of Aboriginal culture, than in direct interpretations of the art. In this area his contribution was inestimable. Big Mick died early in 1990.

Freddy Junta

While I was interviewing Daly Pulkara, Freddy Junta looked at many of my drawings, and provided some interpretations of his

own as well as assisting with Daly's answers. Freddy was born at Humbert River station about 1952. His father was a Wolayi Ngarinman and his mother was Bilinara. As a child and young teenager, Freddy accompanied his parents on wet season walkabouts in the Wickham River country and into Bilimatjaru in Bilinara country. Although not yet old, he has firsthand knowledge of his country and was able to speak with some authority on the art that I had recorded.

Hobbles Tanaiyari

In 1975 Hobbles (Plates 124, 130) took me to an art site in Mudbura country and discussed the art with me. This site is restricted to men and is not dealt with in detail in this thesis. While I was interviewing Alan Young in Yarralin community, Hobbles sat with us for a while and joined our discussion of the art.

Hobbles was born about 1925 in eastern Mudbura country, both his parents coming from that language area. He spent most of his life working on Wave Hill and Victoria River Downs stations, and was one of the leaders of the Aboriginal strikes of the 1960's and early 1970's.

During the time I knew him he was a respected elder and was recognised by other Aborigines in the Victoria River district as the leader for the men's component of the Pandimi (young men's initiation, 'big river country') ritual. This ritual is sung during young men's initiation and celebrates the travels of the Nanganarri Women who passed through Malngin, Ngarinman, Bilinara and Mudbura country. In the final years of his life Hobbles despaired for the future of his culture and it was in this frame of mind that he died in 1988.

9 LANDSCAPE - ARTSCAPE

Given that most images on rocks are the living presence of Dreaming beings and that many of these same Dreaming beings established the present social-geographic units, a relationship between the 'rock art' and these units could be expected. If rock art sites were plentiful and uniformly distributed across the landscape, one might expect family areas to be visible in the art as clusterings of particular motifs indicating the localised Dreamings of each particular area. Uniform distribution of art sites is, of course, not the case.

The presence or absence of rock art is, in the first instance, an accident of geology. For example, being almost totally basalt and limestone downs with very few large outcrops of stone, Karangpurru country is virtually devoid of rock art. Similar geological variations may occur *within* individual language areas. Bilinara country, for instance, has extensive areas of sandstone containing major concentrations of rock art sites, equally extensive areas of basalt downs with no rock art, and areas where sandstone outcrops containing rock art are scattered across basalt downs and sandplains. In areas such as this the art 'record' is patchy and there would be no way of knowing whether any patterns in the art reflected the full extent of a social-geographic unit.

Even if rock art sites were uniformly distributed across the landscape, discovering meaningful patterns in the art would be complicated by several other factors. The majority of *named* Dreaming sites are places where a feature of the landscape is said to have been created by a Dreaming being; they are waterholes, trees, hills, ochre deposits and so on. While a specific feature is usually involved, the power or influence of the Dreaming being at that place extends some distance beyond that feature, and likewise the name of the feature also incorporates a wider area. There is no set rule for determining the extent of this influence or of the applicability of the name; this can only be determined by the custodians of the site, and will vary according to context.

Of well over 450 Dreaming sites which Victoria River Aborigines have personally taken me to only 22, or approximately 5%, were also rock art sites. In part, this low proportion results from the fact that many Dreaming sites that may have rock art are located in country now inaccessible to older people, and thus were not visited. In addition, some of the sites I mapped were features such as isolated hills, which I only viewed from a distance; it is possible that some of these may have had rock art on small outcrops or pavements. Nevertheless, as a general principle, the category of Dreaming sites is much greater than the category of rock art sites. In addition, the majority of art sites are not found at the focal point of named Dreaming places. However, rock art sites often exist in the same general area as named Dreaming sites; a feature of the land, such as a gallery of rock art, does not have to be named in order to be attributed to Dreaming activity. No matter where an art site is, most of the images will be interpreted with reference to Dreaming beings which were active in the general area.

Another factor making it difficult to identify patterns in the art and to relate them to social-geographic units is the generalised nature of most of the art. An example of an area where a problem of this type could arise is found in Bilinara country where one of the localised Dreamings is Lataj, the rock goanna (probably *Varanus acanthurus*; see Plate 60, Figure 59). In the limited area in which this Dreaming was active I have seen only two galleries, in both of which almost all the motifs are generalised depictions of goannas.

Galleries on Gordon Creek, another part of Bilinara country, also contain similarly generalised representations of goannas. Gordon Creek is not an area where Lataj goannas are said to have been active, and none of the goanna representations there were identified as Lataj. One was identified by one informant as 'tucker' for Dreaming human beings. The same painting was identified by another man as a water goanna (*Varanus mertensi*), a species that has a Dreaming site within the Gordon Creek catchment and which is a 'mate' for the Rainbow snake on which it is superimposed (Plate 131).

Yet another complicating factor is that in most galleries there are representations of Dreaming beings other than the one that is identified as defining that place. For example, Kupakarlarni (in Bilinara country on Gordon Creek) is identified by Aborigines as a place where the localised turtle and echidna Dreamings were active. Turtles and echidnas, often paired, feature in the Kupakarlarni rock art galleries (see Plate 48, Figure 51), but other motifs include human figures, birds, snake, catfish, Rainbow snakes, a crocodile, and a macropod (Plates 44, 132, Figure 57).

I know of no instances where a travelling Dreaming interacted with a localised Dreaming of the same species, but the generalised nature of much of the art would commonly make it impossible to differentiate between representations of different Dreamings of similar species. This could lead to representations of a localised Dreaming in one set of galleries being indistinguishable from representations of a travelling Dreaming in an adjacent set of galleries. On a map of motif distribution these motifs would form a single cluster which would not accurately reflect a social-geographic unit.

An example of an area where problems of this type did arise is found near the eastern end of Jasper Gorge, on the boundary between Ngaliwurru country and Karangpurru country. Walujapi, the Black-headed Python Dreaming travelled through this area, and immediately adjacent to her track there are two separate localised Dreamings, Death Adder and Pandanus snake. Images at one art site in this area were variously interpreted as Black-headed Python or Death Adder, until the matter was resolved in favour of the Death Adder by several men who are custodians of the Dreamings at issue.

Problems also arise from the manner in which a Dreaming being is depicted. Victoria River Aborigines say that many of the Dreaming beings possess both animal and human characteristics. When discussing the activities of Dreaming beings that are, or became, animals, they will often say, 'he's a man' or 'he was a man then'. Most Dreaming beings can therefore be depicted either as an animal or as a human being (in what is undoubtedly art from

the most recent period I have recorded extremely few examples where animal and human characteristics have been combined in one motif; see Plates 133, 134). If galleries contain depictions of Dreaming beings in human form, then without additional cultural knowledge, the images cannot be differentiated from other human figures in a meaningful way, and regional patterns remain elusive.

Myths about localised Dreaming beings sometimes repeat across the landscape. For example, the activities of the turtle and echidna at Kupakalarni (Bilinara country) are identical to those of an echidna and turtle at Manjajku (Ngaliwurru country), eighty kilometres to the north. Similarly, the owlet nightjar, children, crocodile and whirlwind are involved in a series of events in the vicinity of Victoria River Downs homestead (Karangpurru country). Virtually identical events occur on the watershed between Stirling Creek and the West Baines River (Ngarinman country), one hundred and forty kilometres to the west-south-west. It is clear, therefore, that recognition of art motifs requires knowledge of the Dreaming geography of the country, while the presence of the art (or natural features) also serves to validate the social geography.

Localised Dreamings and Family Areas

In much of the Victoria River district, family areas have ceased to have strong social relevance. One area where they are still socially significant and where there are galleries of rock art, is in Ngaliwurru country at Jasper Gorge. Slatey Creek, a cliff-lined tributary of Jasper Gorge, is a family area called Mulukurriniyung, defined primarily by the presence of the Mulukurr ('devil's dog') Dreaming. It is also referred to as 'Slatey Pocket' or 'Mulukurr Pocket', 'pocket' being a European colloquial term for an enclosed valley. Being on the main road from Timber Creek to V.R.D., I have been told the mythology for the area on many occasions. During site mapping work for the Jasper Gorge/Kidman Springs land claim in 1977, I visited several Mulukurriniyung galleries with Riley Young, a custodian for the

area (his father's country). In 1988 the hearing for this claim was held in Mulukurr pocket.

The basic mythology for the area concerns a group of 'blackfellow' Crows who had come on walkabout from the north-west, and were cooking an echidna in Mulukurr pocket. The Mulukurr was attracted by the smell of the echidna and gave chase to the Crows, at least one of which it caught and killed. The other crows then went back to their Dreaming place to the north-west, adjacent to the Mulukurr family area.

In December 1982 and January 1984, I recorded twenty galleries at Mulukurriniyung. Most of these have numerous abraded grooves and pits; seventeen have small, simple paintings including representations that resemble a bird (Figure 111), a crocodile (Figure 112), groups and isolated instances of human figures, a snake-like figure, two echidnas (Figure 113), a turtle, a group of flying foxes (Figure 114), and two dog-like animals (Figure 115). There were also two circular motifs joined by a line, which I could not identify (Figure 116), and various unidentifiable motifs and remnants of paintings. In all, I recorded over fifty reasonably well-preserved paintings.

Only two custodians were available for interview about the paintings. Mululu Bob Pinmaya, a traditional owner for the area through his father, provided identifications for each motif. He was assisted by Big Mick Kangkinang, an extremely knowledgeable man who, although not directly responsible for this family area, was the oldest Ngaliwurru man. Big Mick is blind, but he was able to offer suggestions and provide additional details.

Not surprisingly, Mululu identified the two dog-like paintings as Mulukurr, the echidna-like paintings as the echidna killed and cooked by the 'blackfellow crows' and the bird painting as a crow. He also identified the conjoined circular motifs as 'porcupine guts', the human figures alongside each Mulukurr as 'blackfellow Crows', and most other human figures from the Mulukurr galleries either as Crows, or as Spiders from a localised Spider Dreaming site immediately to the west of the Mulukurr family area. Mululu identified one panel of nine conjoined human figures

as Karu (Male Children) travelling Dreamings who he said came from a site to the north-west of the Mulukurr area. This interpretation was in accord with an on-the-spot interpretation given by Riley Young in 1977.

Mululu identified the flying fox paintings as the travelling Dreaming Flying Foxes who passed along the watershed at the head of Slatey Creek, over twenty kilometres to the south. The crocodile-like motif he identified as Jawalara, the Dreaming Mopoke for which there are Dreaming sites on the north side of Jasper Gorge, directly opposite Mulukurr pocket. When I suggested that the painting looked like a crocodile Mululu replied 'Yeah, but he was sitting down you know'.

The point to be made here is that of over fifty paintings recorded in Mulukurr pocket, only five depict in animal form the Dreaming beings that are explicitly mentioned in current mythology for this family area (Mulukurr, Crow and Echidna). Also depicted in animal form are paintings identified as, in one instance, a localised Dreaming from an adjacent area (Mopoke), and, in another instance, a group of travelling Dreamings active more than twenty kilometres to the south (Flying Foxes).

Twenty nine paintings are of human or human-like figures, some of which were identified as localised Dreamings active in Mulukurr pocket (Crows), some of which were identified as a localised Dreaming from an adjacent area (Spider), and some of which were identified as a travelling Dreaming that passed close to the Mulukurr family area (Karu - Male Children).

The depiction in Mulukurr pocket of travelling and localised Dreamings that do not 'belong' there on the basis of family area cannot be attributed to the absence of suitable 'canvases' in the areas where these Dreamings have sites. Sandstone or limestone rockfaces and shelters are found in the areas where the localised Spider, Crow and Mopoke Dreamings were active, as well as along the tracks of the travelling Flying Fox Dreaming and Male Children Dreaming.

The fact that, with the concurrence of Big Mick, Mululu Bob identified paintings *within* Mulukurr pocket as Dreamings which were active *outside* the pocket clearly indicates that the art is not viewed only as a marker of the family area. My experience suggests that the same situation prevails in other family areas in the Victoria River valley.

Travelling Dreamings and Language Areas

I have not been able to discover anything in the rock art of the study region that distinguishes one language territory from another. The Ngarinman, Ngaliwurru, Bilinara, Mudbura, Gurindji and Malgnin people I have worked with have never suggested that the rock art of these people differs, except insofar as the Dreaming presence in an area differs.

Attempts to find patterns in the art which might reflect language areas would be subject to a number of problems, including those that would complicate attempts to identify family areas. I have visited and mapped sites over long sections of the tracks of many of the travelling Dreamings in the Victoria River district, including the Male Children, the Black-headed Python, the Nanganarri Women, the Eagle and Heron, and the Emu and Corella. The vast majority of sites along these tracks could not be recognised as sites without a knowledgeable guide, and comparatively few have rock art. A case study will clarify the types of evidence and the problems of locating patterns.

Kaljaki: a Case Study

Kaljaki, a Black-headed Python Dreaming site, is a prominent hill adjacent to the Stokes Range near the eastern entrance of Jasper Gorge (Plate 5). At the top of the hill there is a sandy-floored rock shelter with paintings on the walls and in alcoves. Dominating the gallery is a very large painting of a female human figure (Plate 135). This painting is much larger than the others in the gallery, and it would be a reasonable assumption that it is a figure of major significance in this site. The gallery also contains paintings of an

echidna, a dingo, stone axes, male and female human figures, a faded snake-like motif, a bird, abraded grooves on bedrock, and numerous pits ground into the main wall.

I have recorded information about this site on a number of occasions and from a number of different informants during the period 1977-88. On two occasions in association with the Jasper Gorge/Kidman Springs land claim hearing in 1988, I visited Kaljaki with Aboriginal custodians who provided detailed interpretations.

During the claim hearing two senior male claimants stated that both men and women camped in the shelter in the wet season. Stone points, scrapers and grindstones on the sandy floor of the main gallery confirm their statements. However, other aspects to the site would not be archaeologically recoverable.

On every occasion when I have discussed this site, both male and female custodians have always said that the site is on the track of Walujapi, the female Black-headed Python. They often told me that there was a 'photo' of her on the hill, a fact confirmed during visits for land claim purposes when the large painting of the woman in the gallery was identified as the Black-headed Python in human form (Plate 135).

During the land claim visits, the custodians stated that the hill has a female side and a male side, that men cannot go onto the female side, and that both men and women had gender-restricted knowledge relevant to the interpretation of the site. They also explained that Kaljaki is the point where the python changed her language from Ngaliwurru to Karangpurru. This is a major linguistic change from one language family (Djamindjungan) to another (Paman-Nyungan; Walsh 1983). The site also marks a major environmental change, from 'saltwater' country to 'big river country' (Chapter 7), a feature to which there is oblique reference in the mythology for the site.

With the exception of the stone tools, and perhaps the assumption that the large female figure was of some importance, there is nothing in the rock art or in other aspects of the site

that would indicate the significance that the site has for custodians. Stylistically, the paintings at Kaljaki are indistinguishable from those at many other sites throughout the Victoria River valley. The point of greatest significance to this discussion is the fact that the major linguistic change that occurs at Kaljaki does not appear to be reflected in the rock art; certainly the Aborigines who visited Kaljaki during the land claim hearing in 1988 did not point out or in any way suggest that such a change was indicated in the art, even though the change in language at this point was an important aspect of their evidence.

From Kaljaki, the Python travelled eastward across Karangpurru country, performing actions that marked the land and passing by or interacting with many localised Dreamings: Hopping Mouse, Crab, Plains Kangaroo, Quail, Spider, Crocodile, Centipede, Pigeon, Barramundi, Lightning, Owl and Rain Bird. After Kaljaki there are at least twenty five named places on her track before the next rock art site is found at Wampuran, over seventy kilometres away.

Wampuran, a site restricted to men, has a number of small (30-40 cm) snake-like designs pecked onto the shelves of an exposed basalt face on the bend of a creek (not illustrated because of gender restrictions). There are no apparent similarities between these two art sites, and without additional cultural information no connection could be made between the art at Kaljaki and the art at Wampuran. A short distance further along the track from Wampuran is another prominent hill; here Walujapi changed the language she was speaking from Karangpurru to Mudbura. To my knowledge, there is no rock art at this site.

Depictions of snakes are common in shelters throughout the Victoria River district. Most of these, with the exceptions of the animal-headed Rainbow snake, are generalised; I have seen none with the distinctive dark head and transverse stripes characteristic of the black-headed python. It is therefore unlikely that mapping the occurrence of snake motifs would reveal the track of the Black-headed Python, or any other of various snake Dreamings in the Victoria River region.

Universally Localised Dreamings

Another problem in equating motifs with social-geographical units concerns Dreaming beings for which there are specific Dreaming places, but which are also believed to be present and active in the land independent of these specific sites. An example here is the Rainbow snake.

Depictions of the Rainbow snake are common throughout the Victoria River district, and quite often are found at sites which are not specifically Rainbow snake Dreaming sites. There are two reasons which may explain why depictions of Rainbow snakes have such a widespread distribution, why they commonly occur in areas where according to Aborigines there are no Rainbow snake Dreaming places.

First, Victoria River Aborigines believe that most permanent waterholes are inhabited by a Rainbow snake, irrespective of the explicit Dreaming significance of the waterhole. Second, the Rainbow snake is a key figure in the Big Sunday ritual complex, and as such, it is intimately associated with the fully initiated Dreaming men who travelled through each social-linguistic area.

On one of the tributaries of Gordon Creek, in Bilinara country, there is a Rainbow snake Dreaming site called Mamarang ('dangerous'). According to local tradition this Rainbow snake was the agent used in a sorcery attack on Europeans in the early days of settlement. Another tradition attributes the death of a group of Aborigines to this snake. I have been told that there are 'photos' [paintings] there of a Rainbow snake which is the 'biggest boss one', but I have not visited this site because of time constraints and because it is close to an extremely important and restricted men's site.

I have visited many galleries along an 18 kilometre section of Gordon Creek below Mamarang. To my knowledge there are no explicit Rainbow snake Dreaming places along this part of Gordon Creek, yet Rainbow snakes are depicted with much greater frequency there than in any other region I have visited. This

frequency could be seen to reflect the influence of 'biggest boss' Rainbow snake at Mamarang, but the Aboriginal interpretations did not make this point.

Most of the Gordon Creek galleries overlook Gordon Creek which, in the dry season, is a series of permanent waterholes. This section of Gordon Creek is also very close to Bilinara, the most important site in the regional Big Sunday complex. Alan Young stated that Dreaming 'Blackfellows' interacted with the Rainbow snake as they travelled along Gordon Creek on their way to the main ceremonial site at Bilinara (see Chapter 11).

The point to be made here is that a boundary could be drawn around the area on Gordon Creek where depictions of the Rainbow snake are most common; this would almost certainly be a function of the ritual relationship to the Bilinara men's site rather than a reflection of a social-geographical unit. It can be construed as a Dreaming track (a 'men's business' route), but it cannot be construed as a Rainbow Snake track.

Much of what I have said above about the Black-headed Python and the Rainbow snake could be said of other Dreaming beings in the region; mapping the occurrence of different motifs is unlikely to lead reliably to information about Dreaming tracks, or about social-geographic units.

Environmentally-defined Units

The focus of my field research was in the big river country of the Victoria River valley. My data from the desert country is sketchy as I have had to rely on published sources, but I have visited one hundred art sites, including nine with pecked engravings, within the saltwater zone. In comparing the art of the river and coastal zones, several features are apparent.

First, the art in both regions seems to be built on a common foundation. With respect to pecked engravings, my sample from saltwater country is too small for reliable statements to be made. However, most of the figures I have recorded to date exhibit no

appreciable difference from those in the river country. The series of large and elaborate anthropomorphic figures in Wardaman country at Jalijbang (Lewis and McCausland 1987) appear to be unique in local as well as regional terms. There is no reason to believe that they serve to distinguish engravings in the Wardaman language area from engravings in other Victoria River language areas, or engravings in the saltwater country from those in the river country.

Much the same may be said of the paintings from the two regions. Both regions exhibit a great diversity in subject matter, but no figures can be singled out which characterise either region in terms of style, form, colour scheme, and perspective. A great many of the paintings from one region are basically the same as those in the other (cf Plate 51 with Plate 54 and Plate 52 with Plate 136; see Stanner 1979: 116, 347).

One difference may be seen in subject matter. As would be expected when looking at figurative art from different environments, there are differences in the species portrayed. For instance, stingrays, sawfish and sharks are found in the subject matter in saltwater country, but not in the river country (except, perhaps, with marginal overlap). Similarly, European boats of various types are virtually restricted to the saltwater region.

Another difference between the two regions is seen in the relative frequency of highly elaborated figures. In the saltwater region, figures that have sections filled in with different colours, sections infilled with dots or parallel stripes of different colours, and with three or more colours or shades of colours used are comparatively common (eg see Plates 98, 99, 137, 138; Walsh 1988: plates 221, 194, 232-34, 237, 239, 240, 241, 242).

Other differences in content seem to be a matter of relative frequency rather than a clear-cut division based on environmental factors. For example, in the saltwater country at least eleven 'sun' motifs are known (1.13% of my sample) as opposed to five similar figures (.14% of my sample) in the the river country. These are circular motifs surrounded by or infilled with 'rays', sometimes with a line dividing the circle and a patch of pigment on each

dividing line creating the appearance of a face (eg Plates 104, 139, 140, 141, 142 and Figures 117, 118; see Stanner 1979: 47; Walsh 1988: plates 174, 176).

According to Walsh (1988: 152) these 'sun' motifs are a highly developed feature in the repertoire of the art of the Fitzmaurice River headwaters and lower Victoria River country, 'but are found with varying frequency over at least 600km.' My own observations tend to support Walsh's view. It appears to be the case that the *frequency* of such figures declines as one moves from the saltwater country in the north, to the river country in the south, that there are *clines* in the art, rather than boundaries, but I do not have sufficient sampling data to make firm statements.

Highly elaborated figures seem particularly common, and particularly distinctive, in Wardaman language area, a territory which is largely within the Daly/Flora/Katherine catchment (see Maps 3 and 4), and which has been influenced to some degree by Arnhem Land cultures (see Plates 91, 143, 144; Walsh 1988: plates 221, 194, 232-34, 237, 239, 240, 241, 242). However, figures as elaborate, or nearly so, and sometimes elaborated in similar ways, are occasionally found in the river country (eg see Plates 25, 35, 37, 56).

Ritual Communities

Ritual communities are not land units in the manner of family areas, skin areas or language areas. In the Victoria River valley, all river country people and most, if not all, saltwater country people are linked by a network of Dreaming tracks that is focused on a site in Bilinara country. These groups clearly constitute a ritual community and the rock art in the territories that make up this community is of a homogeneous character. I do not have data on the extent of Victoria River-type pecked engravings beyond the Victoria River valley. However, Victoria River-type paintings are not restricted to this ritual grouping; paintings of similar character occur far beyond the Victoria River valley. It is possible that this type of rock painting is one marker of a culture area.

Culture Area

Defining a 'culture area' is subject to many of the same problems as attempts to define a 'tribe'; distinctive Aboriginal groups possess many different characteristics and different combinations of these may be shared with their neighbours. Sets of characteristics do not often coincide to form a clear-cut boundary; usually different cultural features extend over different geographical ranges (see Peterson 1976). Due to lack of available data, the maximum extent of the area in which Victoria River-type art occurs is difficult to determine, but available evidence tends to confirm Peterson's (1976: 50-71) suggestions about the constraints imposed by topography. Peterson (*ibid*) argues that drainage basins tend to define the limits of culture areas - where drainage basins are well defined they often coincide with boundaries in cultural features such as language or art; where watersheds are of very low relief they are not likely to be of great importance.

With regard to the Roper River valley, for example, there are several lines of evidence which suggest that it is not part of a 'Victoria River' culture area. First, between the Victoria River valley and the Roper River valley, there is an extensive area of flat, relatively waterless country which forms a natural barrier between the two regions. Second, to my knowledge there are no Dreaming links between the two valleys. Third, in 1975 an elderly Gurindji man (Long Johnny Kitngayari - deceased) expressed the opinion that the 'Roper River mob' were wild people who practiced cannibalism. It is not completely clear whether this man had specific Roper River groups in mind or was referring to Roper River people in general. It is clear, however, that there is almost no contact between the two regions at the present time.

Few, if any, rock art sites exist in the arid country between the two valleys (*pers. obs.*). In the Roper River valley only five art sites have been published and the motifs in these galleries do not fit within the range of Victoria River art. At four sites the motifs are clearly related to Arnhem Land art (Elkin 1952: 245-55;

Macintosh 1952: 256-74; Maddock 1971: 44-63). At the third site (Mountford and Brandl 1967: 371-82) a few motifs have what appear to be simple X-ray features (eg their figures 5A, 5L, 6A, 8E); the others show little similarity with Arnhem Land. Some of the motifs are similar to Victoria River art (eg their figures 4B, 7L), but the subject matter and/or decoration of many figures does not fit within the range of Victoria River valley paintings (eg their figures 4A, 4L, 5J, 5C, 6K, 6L, 8C, 8G, 8K).

The uppermost reaches of the Victoria River valley are relatively arid and merge gradually into the flat arid sandplain country of the northern Tanami desert. The same Gurindji man who expressed negative opinions about Roper River people also expressed a dislike of Warlpiri people from the desert region. Nevertheless, the valley and the sandplains are connected by a number of Dreaming tracks, which indicate a degree of social interaction between the two regions in the past. Relations of marriage, trade and ritual are maintained at the present time.

Rock shelters and outcrops where rock art might be found are scarce in the sandplain country and are scattered over a vast area. No examples of art from this region have been published, and the only site I have seen, at Tanami Rockhole, is dominated by pecked engravings of concentric circles and animal tracks - motifs typical of desert art.

Various lines of evidence suggest that the Fitzmaurice River valley is part of the 'Victoria River' culture area. First, Jaminjung-speaking people occupy the country between the rivers (Map 3). Second, the two regions are connected by a number of important Dreaming tracks. A major trade route extends from the Victoria River valley, through the Fitzmaurice River valley to the Port Keats area.

The watershed between the two valleys contains areas of rugged range country, but there are also wide corridors of flat, well watered country joining the two river systems. A number of photographs of rock paintings from the Fitzmaurice River valley have been published by Stanner (1960: cover photo, 1979: 45, 116, 138, 347). In subject matter, general style and colour

scheme, the paintings in these photographs fit within the range of Victoria River art. Indeed, most appear to be painted in the full red silhouette with white outline and details which is typical of so much Victoria River painted art.

Much the same situation exists between the Victoria River valley and the Keep and Ord River valleys. Various travelling Dreamings move from west to east connecting the Ord, Keep and Victoria River valleys in turn or directly connecting the Ord River valley with the Victoria. A major trade route also connects the three valleys and people in the western Victoria River country maintain marriage and ritual links with people in the Keep River and Ord River valleys.

There are areas of rugged ranges, but also wide relatively flat and well watered corridors linking the different river systems. I have recorded several sites with rock paintings in Miriwung country, in the Keep River valley and the Ord River valley (see Maps 3 and 4). The style of representation at these sites clearly falls within the range of Victoria River painted art (eg compare Plate 32 with Plate 56, Plate 46 with Plate 55, and Figures 37 and 39 with Figures 28 and 29). Examples of paintings from unspecified locations elsewhere in the Ord River valley, published by Crawford (1968: plates 91, 98-100), and in the Bow River valley (a western tributary of the Ord), published by Playford (1960: figure 1), also fit within the range of Victoria River art.

On the western side of the Ord River my data is minimal. The Pentecost/Durack River system lies to the west of the Ord River valley and east of the Wandjina art area (see Map 4). It is bounded on both sides by rugged range country. McCarthy (1967b) and Crawford (1968) have published photographs of paintings from this catchment area, near Forrest River Mission. Some of the paintings in McCarthy's figure 46 are simple monochrome white Wandjina faces; others more closely resemble Victoria River figures, but are decorated in a distinctive manner. One of the paintings in Crawford's plate 92 is a crudely executed monochrome red Wandjina-like arc. Superimposed on and adjacent to this arc are several lizard-like motifs with interior decoration unlike either Wandjina art or Victoria River art.

Summary

Any attempt to identify patterns in the art which reflect family areas, skin areas or language areas is fraught with difficulties. The factors which limit such attempts include uneven distribution of art sites, the generalised quality of most of the depictions, the fact that Dreaming beings changed shape, the presence of images of different types of Dreamings (localised, travelling or 'universally localised') or of Dreaming food animals at the same site, and the fact that Aboriginal artists apparently did not intend a particular style, colour scheme or motif strictly and unambiguously to mark a social-geographical unit or boundary.

Environmentally-defined areas are loosely construed, and are not highly defined in regional affairs. The majority of artworks in river country are similar to those in saltwater country. Depictions of saltwater/estuarine species appear to be restricted to saltwater country and there may^{be} greater numbers of elaborately decorated figures in this environmental zone, but this remains to be confirmed. I have no evidence that rock art style has been used to differentiate the zones.

The only social-geographic unit that is likely to be reflected in the distribution of Victoria River-type rock art (paintings) is the culture area. At present neither the full extent of Victoria River-type paintings, nor the extent of the 'Victoria River' culture area is known. The distribution of Dreaming tracks, trade routes and the current patterns of social interaction suggest that societies in the Victoria, Fitzmaurice, Keep and Ord River valleys belong to a single culture area. This suggestion is supported by the known distribution of rock paintings; Victoria River-type paintings have been recorded in the western watershed of the Ord River valley and in the northern catchment of the Fitzmaurice River. No rock art from the northern Tanami desert has been published and the only site I have seen has engraved concentric circle and track motifs typical of western desert art. The eastern boundary of this 'Greater Victoria River' culture area probably conforms to the eastern watershed of the Victoria River valley itself.

10 ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE ART

Introduction

From my inquiries into the identification and meaning of the motifs I had sketched, and from site visits and discussions with Aborigines throughout the district, it is clear that location is a critical feature in interpreting art works. Location identifies rights to speak and is therefore essential to the transmission of knowledge. More importantly, knowledge of location allows the art to be connected to the Dreaming geography of which it is an integral part. In this chapter I address the origin of the images and analyse Aboriginal systems of explanation. I then examine the ways in which individual figures are identified and describe several categories of Dreaming beings. I conclude with a discussion of locality.

The Origin of the Images

Victoria River Aborigines assign individual artworks to two main categories: those that were produced by ordinary human beings and those of Dreaming origin. This classification was usually based on personal assessment of the subject matter of the art, but in a few instances physical properties of the images were cited as evidence for classification. For example, Hobbles Tanaiyari declared that engraved human and animal tracks at one site were the actual tracks of Dreaming beings who walked there 'when the rock was soft'. At another place Hobbles cited as evidence of Dreaming origin the fact that the pigment could not be rubbed off the rockface by hand.

As far as it is possible to generalise when dealing with a highly flexible and interpretive socio-cultural complex, the majority of motifs are said to be 'Dreaming'; they *are* living, conscious Dreaming beings. The non-Dreaming category consists of artworks created by ordinary human beings. Non-Dreaming art may be further classified either as 'sorcery art' or as images created 'just for nothing' or for 'educational' purposes.

Just which motifs are assigned to which category varies to some degree from person to person. In the words of Elkin, Aboriginal peoples' '...understanding and interpretation may vary because of age, training, philosophical appreciation, but it is always within the cultural context' (personal communication cited by Macintosh 1977: 197). Those whose knowledge is comprehensive and who are willing to share their knowledge, identify the great majority of motifs as being of Dreaming origin. For these individuals, almost all of the images are Dreaming beings; the only artworks that are not of Dreaming origin are those identified as sorcery-motivated or as 'contact' motifs. Conversely, those whose knowledge is weak, who are uninterested, or who do not wish to divulge important information, appear to classify a much larger proportion of the motifs as being of human origin.

There are several ways in which images on rocks may be said to be Dreaming. The most direct way is where a motif from a particular place is identified as the living presence of a Dreaming being known to be associated with the locale. Another way is to identify animals and plant foods portrayed as the 'beef' or 'tucker' that Dreaming beings hunted or gathered, and technological items depicted as those used by Dreaming beings.

It was not always immediately evident to me what was meant by statements such as 'only blackfella bin draw 'em' or 'only just for nothing'. This ambiguity seems to be bound up in the concepts of 'Dreaming' versus the 'ordinary present'. As discussed in Chapter 6, the term 'Dreaming' may refer to the time when the present social, technical and physical world order was established. This was a time when great creative beings were active on the earth in interchangeable human and animal form. At the same time Dreaming human beings are said to have inhabited the land, hunting, gathering and engaging in all the activities that characterise traditional Aboriginal life. The term 'blackfella' could refer to Dreaming beings or ordinary human beings.

While the beings active in the Dreaming often possess both human and animal characteristics, beings that possessed only human characteristics were also present in the land, living in the

same manner as non-Dreaming people did in the recent past. People today 'follow the Dreaming'; all aspects of the traditional world have their origin in the Dreaming. Therefore depictions of, for example, people hunting (Figure 45), fishing (Figures 46, 47) or engaged in sexual intercourse (Plate 61, Figure 60-62) may be interpreted as 'Dreaming Blackfellows' engaged in those activities. Some otherwise inexplicable motifs are even seen as the results of 'Dreaming Blackfellows' painting on the rocks 'just for fun' (Tim Yilngayari, Daly Pulkara).

Systems of Explanation

In order to address the question of what motifs are or represent, and why they are located where they are, I will first consider the general issue of systems of explanation. I will then discuss in detail how the men I spoke with went about identifying motifs, but first a few words on explanation at a more general level. As discussed in Chapter 6, Dreamings created a world of significance. Stanner's statement that Aboriginal people move through a landscape saturated with significance indicates the potential for meaning in the world. The Ngaliwurru, Karangpurru, Ngarinman, Bilinara, Malngin, and Mudbura people with whom Debbie Rose and I have spoken in depth assert that everything in the world has its origin in Dreaming. Big Mick Kangkinang said, for example, that 'everything comes from Dreaming. That's no more nothing.' Peter Sutton (1988a:13) asserts that this view is typical of most Aboriginal societies. He sums it up in the phrase 'Nothing is nothing'.

My research indicates that Victoria River Aborigines draw upon a number of different explanations for the origin and meaning of rock art motifs, and their choice of explanation may be influenced by a variety of factors. Most of the men with whom I discussed the art drew upon more than one of these explanations. There was rarely any rigid correlation between the type of motif being discussed and the explanation given. Motifs with similar characteristics but located at different sites were sometimes interpreted differently by the one informant during the one interview. For example, Anzac identified Figures 69 and 72 as

sorcery and Figure 75 as Lightning. In other instances informants interviewed separately often gave different explanations for the same motif. For instance, the motifs Anzac identified as sorcery motivated (Figures 69 and 72) were independently identified by Alan Young and Hobbles Tanaiyari, and by Freddy Junta and Daly Pulkara, as Lightning beings.

Different explanations for similar motifs are not necessarily related to differences in the Dreaming significance of the sites where the art is located. In fact, in many instances art sites are not located at named localities where Dreaming beings are said to have been active and where there are physical features resulting from these actions. In some cases it appears that explanations were randomly selected from a range of possibilities, although each man or group of men had a tendency to refer to only one type of explanation for a given class of motifs. In other cases it appears that associated motifs make the difference. It is clear that there are several systems or frameworks in which the rock art may be viewed.

These systems may be considered as a continuum from the most 'outside' or public level of meaning to the most 'inside' or restricted meaning. Multiple levels of meaning are a feature of various aspects of Victoria River Aboriginal life; they are integral to the controlled revelation of knowledge. None of my informants treated these systems as mutually exclusive categories, although this is theoretically possible; for convenience I will treat them separately here.

1) A system of public or 'outside' meanings in which artworks are explained as the work of ordinary people, done 'just for nothing' or to decorate the rocks. All of the men with whom I discussed the art could identify the various motifs, but some declared that many of the motifs were 'just a drawing' apparently created 'just for fun' or 'to make 'im pretty'. For the most part paintings explained in this way were attributed to ordinary human beings, but in some instances a Dreaming origin was invoked, that is, Dreaming humans painted the images 'just for nothing'.

There are several possible reasons for a 'just for nothing' explanation. First, the informant may have had a particular motive for explaining the art in this way, as opposed to other ways. During my interview with Alan Young I asked him what women or children would be told if they asked questions about an image that had significance in men's secret ritual. He answered, 'Nothing. "Ah this one only just a Dreaming down near the water, just in the water". That's all. We don't tell 'im straight. Nothing'. I suspect that some of my informants responded to my questions in much the same way that Alan said he would respond to similar questions from a woman, child, or uninitiated male.

Anzac was one of the men who explained many of the motifs as the result of humans creating the art 'just for nothing'. During our discussions I gained a distinct impression that he did not wish to divulge any but the most public of interpretations, and wished to discourage my interest in the art.

Mululu Bob was another who often stated that certain motifs were created 'just to make 'im pretty' or 'for nothing'. In other contexts, including the land claim process, Mululu Bob has been singled out by other Aborigines as a knowledgeable person who could answer many questions, but I have always found him to be self-deprecating or reluctant to become involved. With regard to my questions on rock art, I gained the impression that he was fairly disinterested in the whole endeavour. It is possible that he, like Anzac, may also have been reluctant to communicate other than totally public information, and that he wished to discourage my interest.

Second, it could be the informant's genuine belief. This appears to have been the case with Barry Young Kartija. Barry commonly dismissed motifs as 'just a drawing', but rather than his answers being an attempt to divert my interest, I suspect that he genuinely believed what he told me. In other contexts I have found his ability to explain aspects of traditional culture to be limited and it has often seemed that his knowledge of myths and songs was relatively undeveloped.

2) A system of public meanings concerning (a) localised Dreamings, associated figures and objects, and (b) travelling Dreamings, associated figures and objects, with comparatively little interaction between them. Alan Young, Daly Pulkara, and Old Tim showed a strong interest in examining my sketches of the art, and in teaching me what they understood the images to mean. In the majority of instances these men stated that the motifs were Dreaming beings themselves, including both travelling Dreamings and localised Dreamings. Where there was a public meaning they interpreted the motifs accordingly. They then often elaborated in terms of restricted men's knowledge which is the third system of meanings. In some instances links were indicated between the secular and the restricted realms, and between travelling and localised Dreamings that in the public context were described as being separate.

In most instances the link between a motif and an explanation given by Alan, Daly and Old Tim was entirely consistent with the systems of explanation which prevail in other (non-rock art) contexts, a system well summarised in the phrase 'nothing is nothing' (Sutton 1988a: 13). In contrast, some of the explanations given by Mululu Bob, Barry Young and Anzac Munganyi were not characterised by this cultural consistency.

3) A gender and age restricted system of meanings. In this system, public localised Dreamings and secret travelling Dreamings interact in the formation and enactment of the 'Big Sunday' ritual. Associated motifs include food-animals and ritual objects used by the Dreaming beings. Alan Young, Daly Pulkara and Tim Yilngayari made it clear that almost all of the art can be interpreted in terms of knowledge restricted to men. The majority of their interpretations referred to 'men's business' or, more specifically, to the Big Sunday ritual complex (see Chapter 11).

At this level of interpretation, almost all of the paintings and engravings on the rocks are seen either as the living presence of the Dreaming beings who acted and interacted to produce the complex of meanings called Big Sunday, or they are the results of their actions. The Dreaming food-animals they ate, the Dreaming

artefacts they made, the Dreaming sorcery art they created, and so on, are present in rock art.

Each of these systems of explanation are related. It is apparent that my different teachers tended to treat me as though I was at different stages of learning which, in a sense, I was! I have not been able to observe different levels of meaning being transmitted to an individual with regard to a particular motif, but a hypothetical case will suffice to illustrate some of the possible connections.

A child might be told that a particular painting of a kangaroo is 'just nothing' or that 'just old people bin draw 'im'. If the child is male, after he undergoes the first stage of initiation and becomes a young man, he might be told that the painting represents the localised Dreaming Kangaroo that lived in the general area, and to which he is related through his father. All living kangaroos are descendants of this original Dreaming Kangaroo so a painting previously interpreted as 'just a kangaroo, painted for nothing' is nevertheless linked to the realm of Dreaming. Later, when the young man has passed through the Big Sunday ritual and becomes a fully initiated man, he might come to understand that the same image is the localised Dreaming Kangaroo that interacted in some significant way with the travelling Dreaming Blackfellows on their way to a ritual gathering. He might also come to understand that there are other aspects of knowledge dealing with kangaroos that the painting represents. All interpretations or meanings are culturally construed, are related, and are correct in each context.

Aboriginal Identifications of Motifs

For the most part, Victoria River District rock art representations are generalised. I will focus on the the various types of information that the men may draw upon to establish precise identifications of animals. I will deal with these aspects separately although in practice, Aborigines often consider more than one aspect when making their identifications. Some of these approaches to identifying animals are also used to help differentiate particular types of 'human' or 'human-like' figures. I

will refer to this wherever appropriate, but will deal more fully with 'human' figures separately.

Relative Size

The size of one motif relative to another was sometimes used as an identifying feature. For example, Anzac identified the small figure on the right in Plate 69 as a 'piccaninny' because of its small size compared to the figure to its ^{left}right. Daly and Old Tim independently identified the macropod-like animal in Plate 42 as a small rock wallaby called Wukatij because of its small size relative to the associated human figure, and because they knew the depiction came from a sandstone area where this animal lives. In another example several small snakes superimposed on an extremely large depiction of a Rainbow snake were identified by Alan Young as water snakes called Kunutjari. Alan stated that Kunutjari snakes were 'tucker' for the Rainbow snake.

In other instances the relative size of motifs had no bearing on identifications. For example, in Plate 145, oval objects adjacent to birds were independently identified by Daly Pulkara and Anzac Munganyi as rockholes where the bird drank. Similar oval objects near snakes in Figure 54 were identified as rocks where the snake 'camped' (Daly Pulkara).

Colour

In only one instance was a specific identification given on the basis of colour. Anzac identified one figure as a 'pandanus' snake called Kinirin because the yellow colour of the painting was the colour of that snake species.

Universally Localised Shapes

Certain Dreaming beings may be intimately associated with particular places, but at the same time be found anywhere. Specifically, these are the interrelated complex of beings focussed

on the Rainbow snake and Lightning beings, and beings known as Kaya or 'devil' (glossed by Rose 1984 as 'custodians of the dead'; Chapter 6). Each of these beings is associated with particular sites in the landscape, but they are not restricted to these sites.

One motif found in galleries throughout the region is recognised easily and with total consistency by Aboriginal men. This is the Rainbow snake, distinguished from other snakes in the art primarily by its depiction with large ears (Plates 24, 115, 146, 147; Figures 56, 57; see Chapter 3). Rainbow snakes are commonly depicted as a snake with an animal head (in appearance, a snake with ears). In this form, they are unambiguous. Snakes in ordinary shape may be any one of a number of local species unless they are depicted with species specific characteristics - a rare occurrence in Victoria River rock art - or they may be Rainbow snakes 'changed over'. In this case cultural knowledge provides the only clues to identification.

There are numerous ways that the men may arrive at a precise identification for motifs other than the Rainbow snake. In some instances, sufficient information for identification is encoded in the motif. In other instances cultural knowledge provides the only clues. Sometimes a single feature is enough for a precise identification to be made, but more commonly a combination of features is taken into account.

During the dry season Rainbow snakes are said to inhabit all permanent waterholes, while in the wet season, they are found in the storms and floodwaters that sweep the land. Lightning beings accompany the Rainbow in the wet season storms while death, and therefore the Kaya, knows no temporal or spatial boundaries. Being of this ubiquitous character they may be seen as images on the rocks in any location; the place may not be Dreaming for these beings, but the images are still Dreaming. Kaya and Lightning depictions are human-like and are discussed below.

Human Shapes

Generalised human or 'human-like' figures are of course easily recognised as such by both Aborigines and Europeans. They are depicted with a wide variety of body shapes and attitudes; some are squat and bulky while others are long and thin (cf Figure 26 with Figure 48). Some have stiff arms and legs while others have highly contorted limbs (cf Figures 42, 111 with Figures 50, 75). In all of these their human-like configuration is self evident. More precise identifications - just what manner of 'human' or 'human-like' being is portrayed - are dependent upon the presence of additional features, the activities portrayed, other cultural knowledge, or the opinion of the informant.

Where the motifs were of plain human figures they were commonly identified as one of the Dreaming beings that lived in or passed through the local area. In other contexts, as well as during my interviews, some of the Dreamings so identified were described as particular animal species or as inorganic objects such as the sun or rain. Such identifications were consistent with the concept that most Dreaming beings were both human and animal/natural phenomena, and could change their shape at will.

Human figures shown hunting or fishing were identified by some informants as ordinary human beings, and by others as Dreaming humans. Motifs such as these were sometimes said to represent a good hunter. Whether Dreaming or ordinary, no connection was made between the activities portrayed and esoteric knowledge; ordinary people hunt and fish, Dreaming people hunt and fish.

Human figures were frequently identified as men and women who existed in the Dreaming solely in human form. Sometimes knowledge of these Dreaming human beings was public. The Nanganarri Women are one example. In other instances the human figures were identified within the framework of restricted information.

Among the highly varied human or human-like figures are many with additional features that seem to be unique in the sense that I have located only one example of each (eg Plate 149, Figures

119-122). However, there are two groups of distinctive figures that occur in different shelters throughout the region. One group consists of figures with swellings on the limbs or body; they often have twisted, elongated limbs and enlarged or distorted hands. Plates 66, 150 and Figures 67-75 are examples of these. The other group consists of figures engaged in sexual intercourse (eg see Plate 61, Figures 60-62).

Human figures, whether 'ordinary', possessing unique or recurring features, or portrayed engaged in particular activities, are identified in different ways by different Aborigines. Some are identified as Dreaming beings in human form. Many are placed by Aborigines in one or the other of several Dreaming or non-Dreaming categories. These categories are dealt with below.

Lightning Beings

No single type of anthropomorph was consistently identified as Lightning (see Chapter 6 for information concerning these beings). Figures identified as Lightning ranged from 'ordinary' human-shaped figures to figures with unusual physical features (eg Figure 120) to those with distorted, twisted limbs and swollen joints or bodies (eg Figures 72-75).

In some cases figures were identified as Lightning beings wholly or in part because of associated motifs. For example, a figure with distorted limbs and lumps at the joints (Figure 72) was identified by Alan Young as a Lightning being and the motifs surrounding it as Lightning 'power'.

At another gallery figures of this type had long snake-like limbs, snake-like appendages, and were surrounded by snake-like motifs (Figure 75). Alan Young and Hobbles Tanaiyari, Daly Pulkara and Freddy Junta, and Anzac Munganyi independently identified the figures as Lightning beings and the snake-like features as lightning bolts.

Some human figures without these distortions were also identified as Lightning. For example, Mululu Bob and Alan Young

identified the human figure in Figure 123 as a Lightning being because they interpreted the unusual conjoined lumps beside it as 'Lightning power'. In some instances human figures were identified as Lightning beings by their association with Rainbow snakes.

Figures were often identified as Lightning because of unusual features other than the combination of distorted limbs and lumps at the joints. For example, the exaggerated size and red colour of the genitals of two figures in Plate 69 led Barry Young to identify them as Lightning beings. Figures with projections from the head and circular objects alongside (Plate 151) were independently identified by Anzac Munganyi and Alan Young as Lightning beings, the projections and arms representing lightning bolts and the objects representing either water or 'power'.

Certain informants had a tendency to identify particular types of figures as Lightning beings. For example, Alan Young tended to identify figures with distorted limbs and hands, and lumps in the joints and body as Lightning. Men who identified them as Lightning beings explained the lumps as 'power' (ie electrical energy).

Kaya: 'Custodians of the Dead'

There does not appear to be any particular feature that distinguishes representations of 'devils' from representations of other beings. Figures identified as Kaya included those with distorted limbs and lumps at the joints or in the body (Barry Young), figures with projections from the head or with exaggerated genitals, and 'ordinary' human representations (Tim Yilngayari).

Sorcery Figures

Most of the artworks identified as being motivated by sorcery were said to have been created to inflict punishment on wife stealers and/or absconding wives. Generally speaking, figures so

identified fell into one or the other of two types; figures with distorted limbs and lumps at the joints and on the body (otherwise often identified as Lightning beings), or paired human figures depicted engaged in sexual intercourse.

Of figures depicted with swellings and physical distortions, Jack Jangari (Bilinara) and Hobbles Tanaiyari (Mudbura) said that these attributes represented afflictions the sorcery victim would develop. In the case of Figure 72, Anzac Munganyi said that the associated fish-like objects were maggots which would eat the victim from within.

In Victoria River district rock art paintings of figures engaged in sexual intercourse are most commonly attributed to sorcery applied by an aggrieved husband against his errant wife and her lover. In this form of sorcery no physical afflictions are depicted. Several informants said that the victims would become sick and die. Anzac Munganyi suggested that the couple would become 'stuck like a dog', as depicted in the painting.

The only other interpretation for such figures, suggested by several informants, is that they were done by a man 'hungry for girl' (ie desirous of sexual intercourse). In other regions, paintings of figures engaged in sexual intercourse have sometimes been assumed by researchers to be concerned with fertility and/or 'love magic' (eg see Trezise 1971: 10). It is possible that in some instances a 'love magic' function may have been applied in the Victoria River district, but it is apparent that in the majority of instances 'hate magic' would be a more appropriate description.

Superimpositioning and Other Associations

Before going into any detail here it should be remembered that, from an Aboriginal perspective, the Dreaming is not defined in sequential time in the manner of ordinary human existence. Consequently, superimposed art is not understood to be an indication of earlier and later art production or the deliberate covering of one painting with another. For those who view the

bulk of the art as the living presence of the Dreaming, what is now seen on the rocks is the result of an event without chronological depth.

Relationships between motifs were sometimes adduced on the basis of superimpositioning and at other times on the fact that the different motifs were present in the same gallery. In moving from generalised to specific identifications, the men sometimes analysed the gallery as a whole.

For example, at one of the Gordon Creek galleries there are paintings of catfish, identifiable by their 'whiskers' and head shape, and a large Rainbow snake, identifiable by its ears. Along with catfish, Rainbow snakes are intimately associated with water. In addition, Rainbow snakes are the central figure in a complex of mytho-ecological relationships with other species, including catfish. On this basis Alan Young identified a painting superimposed on the Rainbow Snake as Yalkalin, a water goanna (Plate 131). Alan also identified an 'S'-shaped object partly superimposed on the goanna, as Lamut, a grub or grub-like animal said to inhabit trees beside waterholes and eaten by water goannas.

Location

With some notable exceptions, in order to be able to bring their cultural knowledge to bear on the art the men needed to know the location of the motif in question. When I approached different men with my sketch pad copies of rock art galleries, one of their immediate concerns was to ascertain the location. The importance of this information was twofold. First, the men needed to know whether they had the right to speak for the country in which the art was located. Second, with the location in mind they could then think about the art in terms of local or travelling Dreamings and public or restricted mythology, song and ritual. In other words, cultural knowledge is localised, and knowledge of locality is critical in identifying the motifs.

The first principle in identifying motifs seems to be this: most of the images are Dreaming beings, so images on the rocks should reflect some aspect of local Dreaming significance. In many instances, my informants were able to provide a precise identification based on their knowledge of the Dreaming being or beings at the named locality. For example, when shown sketches of paintings at Kupakarlarni (Bilinara country) all of my informants immediately identified paired echidna ('porcupine') and turtle figures as the Dreaming beings that live at that site (Plate 48, Figure 51). Daly actually identified the site where the paintings are located from his first glance at my sketches. Similarly, during a visit to a site called Martpi, Anzac identified a series of 17 goanna paintings as Lataj, the Dreaming rock goanna that inhabits the local area (Plate 60; Bilinara country).

One informant took this approach to the exclusion of all others. When discussing motifs from sites in Jasper Gorge (Ngaliwurru country), Mululu Bob identified motifs from a given locality as representing the Dreaming beings from that locality, and in some cases he totally disregarded the shape of the motif as a source of information. This led him to identify a decidedly crocodile-like painting (Figure 112) as Jawalara, the frogmouth owl, and a group of flying fox-like paintings (Figure 114) as 'porcupine' (echidna). None of the other informants approached faunal identifications in this manner, and Mululu's method must be considered idiosyncratic, representing the most extensive use of location as the source of identification of motifs.

Where a local Dreaming was known to be a particular species, a motif representing an animal of that particular genus was invariably identified as that Dreaming. In this way, for instance, the generalised kangaroo images on the upper Wickham River were identified as Piniri, the Dreaming Hill Kangaroo (*Macropus robustus*) because that Dreaming being inhabits that area.

Region and Locality

The men with whom I carried out intensive interviews are owners of Ngaliwurru, Karangpurru, Ngarinman, Mudbura and

Bilinara countries. They respected the rights to country which specify who may and may not speak for a particular place. At the same time it became clear that their knowledge was more extensive than their specific rights.

All of these men have been participants in the major ritual complex, Big Sunday, which draws the people and countries of the region into a system of meaning (see Chapter 11). All of the men know the songs for areas outside of their 'own' country, and all of them have a legitimate interest in, and concern for, the sites which relate specifically to the major ritual complex.

The men who were willing to share with me knowledge concerning regional ritual significance of the art made it clear that much of the art can be understood as part of a regional system of meaning encoded in the myths and songs of Big Sunday. I turn now to a discussion of this ritual complex.

11 ROCK ART IN THE CONTEMPORARY RITUAL COMPLEX

The various Victoria River social-geographical units together constitute a regional community, connected by ties of marriage, kinship, trade, ritual and Dreamings. Travelling Dreamings provide the immutable network within which people are organised across the landscape. At the level of men's restricted knowledge, encoded in songs, myths, and stories, localised Dreamings are linked into this network of travelling Dreamings so that all people in the region, through their affiliation to localised Dreamings, are integrated into a regional ritual community.

Victoria River rock art, most of which can be identified as Dreaming presence, thus comprises an integrated regional network of meanings. Many of the meanings of the art at the present time are bound up in, and given expression through, the men's secret ritual complex known as Kajiri or Big Sunday. To understand the art, it is necessary to gain some understanding of the Big Sunday ritual.

Big Sunday

Victoria River Aborigines use the Kriol term 'Big Sunday' or the local term 'Kajiri' ('Gadjari': 'old woman', cf Meggitt 1966) to refer to a ritual complex which is similar to that known elsewhere as Kunapipi. An understanding of the broad outlines of Big Sunday ritual and mythology is essential to an understanding of Victoria River rock art.

In 1976 Pincher Numiari, a Gurindji man living at Daguragu, addressed the Koori people of south-eastern Australia, some of whom had approached him wishing to be taught traditional Aboriginal Law (Numiari 1976). Part of Pincher's response was to outline public aspects of men's secret ritual in the Victoria River district:

The most important men's business is *kajiri* or Big Sunday. Every tribe in our area has a secret *juju* business line, they follow the dreaming coming from each

direction and meet up at Bilinara, a very sacred place. The Ngaliwurru come in from the north, the Ngarinman run the business from Jutpara in the West, the Mudbura come from the east, and the people called Walman come from the south.

Bilinara, a very sacred place according to Pincher and to the other men with whom I have spoken, is an art site. It is heavily restricted and cannot be discussed except at the most general level.

The Bilinara Sites Complex

There are a number of galleries at Bilinara, most of which are small in terms of actual shelter space and number of motifs. None of the sites contain any engravings and there is no subject matter in the painted art that is unique to these sites although one item depicted has only been recorded once elsewhere, at a men's site in Ngarinman country. Two of the galleries are outstanding among Victoria River art sites. Most of the paintings in these two galleries are relatively small (less than 1 metre), but they are very well executed, very colourful and of fresher appearance than most other Victoria River paintings.

The range of subject matter, the organisation of particular classes of motifs, and the depiction of particular material culture items in the two main galleries, combine to encode visual information more explicitly than is usually the case in Victoria River sites. In the absence of ethnographic information a reasonable assumption would be that the art at Bilinara depicts a ritual gathering restricted to men. It would be clear that a variety of animals and an animal-headed snake were associated in some manner, and a few organisational details might be also deduced.

Ethnological Context

Stanner (1979: 85) describes the Daly River version of the Big Sunday ritual in the following way:

It is reversionary, mystical, and religious, as well as magical, and is concerned with preserving the

continuity of life. At the same time it is in intelligible series with the conventional initiations. The implicit theme of fertility, the sexual symbolisms, and the summoned presence of the All-Mother, are natural images of life and continuity.

In another paper, Stanner (1959: 4) adds that,

The...ceremony is extremely sacred and secret. It centres on the showing and presentation of bullroarers to young men who have been circumcised some years before. The bullroarers...have the higher degree of sacredness which we may call sacrosanctity. The word *Karawadi* [restricted name in the Victoria River district] is the secret name of a provenant spirit also described as The Mother of All or as The Old Woman.

The Kunapipi ritual is closely related to Big Sunday. According to Berndt and Berndt (1970: 121), the Kunapipi ritual complex extends over much of the Northern Territory, with broadly similar procedures, sacred objects, and key words. They claim that:

The Kunapipi is flexible enough to accomodate a variety of interpretations around its central theme, and even within it. As it passes from one area to another it undergoes certain modifications. New songs may be added, or old ones translated in different ways by people who do not know the language in which these have reached them, although they have been given an account of their meaning.

From what I have learned of the Big Sunday ritual as practiced in the Victoria River district, the Berndt's observations of Kunapipi hold true. According to Berndt (1951: 12) Kunapipi refers to the 'Fertility Mother' and/or the Rainbow snake, and a major theme is fertility: 'the dominant emphasis [of Kunapipi is] on birth, or rebirth: the sacred ground is the 'Mother place' through which men pass to be reborn'.

The 'old woman' of Big Sunday ritual and belief is certainly known in the Victoria River district (pers. comm. Debbie Rose and Patrick McConvell), but in my experience the term is rarely used in relation to Big Sunday. The term 'kajiri' is the local everyday term for a mature woman. However, the only Dreaming beings that I have heard mentioned explicitly in relation to Big Sunday ritual or myth are Miyat, the fully initiated men who travelled through the different

language areas to Bilinara, the Two dogs at Walkara in Mudbura country, and the Rainbow snake, Kurayij. Evidence suggests that in the Victoria River region the 'Old Woman' is regarded as a manifestation of the Rainbow snake which, in some contexts, is described in ways which point to its bisexual nature. When we were discussing the significance of paintings of human figures superimposed on a Rainbow snake (Plate 148), Alan Young said that the humans were Dreaming Blackfellows lifting up the Rainbow snake to get fish from underneath. According to Alan, the blackfellows saw the Rainbow and said, 'ah, old, old woman here...well, no matter. We lift 'im up'.

The Social Organisation of Big Sunday

Victoria River Aborigines believe that during the Dreaming, groups of Dreaming beings came from surrounding regions and converged upon the site called Bilinara, located in Bilinara country. These beings are usually described as fully initiated Dreaming men but they are also animals; when recounting the actions of these men, Victoria River Aborigines almost always speak of them as being fully human, and only occasionally mention their animal qualities.

As they travelled the initiated men, or 'Miyat', performed actions, dancing and singing, interacting with other Dreaming beings, and eventually gathering together at Bilinara. Events transpired such that the men were inspired to make sacred objects and to perform the first Big Sunday ritual. They then placed themselves onto the rocks where they can still be seen, and their saga provides the model for the Kajiri or Big Sunday rituals performed by men today.

When Pincher talked about the different language groups 'following the dreaming' and 'running the business', he was referring to the Dreaming basis of rituals that people (men) today perform. These rituals recreate and celebrate the movements of the Dreaming beings. When men today 'run the business' they sing the songs and dance the dances that were sung and danced by the Dreaming beings themselves.

In the Kajiri or Big Sunday ritual complex, the actions of each group of fully initiated Dreaming men are encoded in songs. Like the original actions of the Dreaming men, lines of songs pass through each surrounding language area and converge on the site called Bilinara. Present day initiated men who are affiliated with each language area are the owners of the song line that passes through their territory. By passing from one language area to the next and converging on Bilinara, the songs connect the people of those language areas. The Big Sunday ritual complex, focusing on Bilinara, forms a ritual network among the various groups in the region.

Pincher's list of groups that have an interest in Bilinara is somewhat abbreviated, probably because he was not intending to provide a thorough account of the ceremonial complex. Of the five socio-linguistic groups that share a common border with Bilinara country (see Map 3), Pincher mentions only two, Ngarinman and Mudbura. However, in 1982 I was taken to the Bilinara site by three Aboriginal men who wanted the site documented for registration with the Aboriginal Sacred Sites Protection Authority.

These men were Hobbles Tanaiyari, a Mudbura man with Bilinara affiliations, and two of the senior Bilinara custodians, Anzac Munganyi and Hector Wanayarri. At the site I was told that when Big Sunday is held in Bilinara country people follow the Dreaming and 'come from all over'. The groups mentioned were Bilinara, Mudbura, Gurindji, Ngarinman, Ngaliwurru, Wardaman, Karangpurru, Jaminjung, Warlmarna (Walman), and Lipilipi (unknown). I was also told that people further away, at Borroloola and 'in the desert', know of Bilinara.

The claim that Bilinara is of regional interest has been confirmed on several occasions since 1982, and by accounts from elsewhere. For example, during site recording work to gather evidence for the Jasper Gorge/Kidman Springs land claim (Ngaliwurru and Karangpurru language areas) in 1985, Alan Young told me that several sites in Karangpurru country were Dreaming for 'Karrama' people, fully initiated men who were travelling through to Bilinara. Tindale (1974: 228) places Karrama (Karaman) territory between Willeroo station, Katherine and Mataranka (see Map 1). However, it

seems likely that Alan Young's 'Karrama people' are the 'Kuwama' located, according to Walsh (1983), in the Daly River district .

In 1989 I was involved with a claim to land by the Bilinara people. In the course of this work I was able to visit the Bilinara site on two occasions, once during a proofing session for the claim, and again during the actual hearing for the claim. On each visit over thirty male claimants were present, songs for the Dreamings were sung, and senior Bilinara custodians discussed the site in some detail. The information provided on both occasions was essentially the same as what I had been told in 1982. On both visits there were men present who had affiliations to Bilinara country as well as to Karangpurru, Wardaman, Ngaliwurru, Mudbura, Ngarinman, Gurindji, and Malngin country. They confirmed the evidence presented by the senior Bilinara claimants.

Two other reports point to the significance of the Bilinara site for people living beyond the immediate vicinity of Bilinara country. One is an account by William Linklater of a myth he recorded on Sturt Creek, far to the south-west of Bilinara. Linklater (1940: 3) was told that a kangaroo was wounded by an 'eagle-man' near the Wolf Creek meteorite crater (W.A.). The kangaroo fled to the east and was finally caught and killed in the Victoria River country where both beings '...turned into a cluster of hills on the high downs on the west side of the Victoria River. They [the hills] are called the Billionaries'. The other account comes from Patrick McConvell (pers. comm.) who found that the Warlpiri people living at Hooker Creek have a strong interest in Bilinara.

From my research it is clear that male custodians of language areas around Bilinara country consider the Bilinara site to be the key site in the Big Sunday ritual complex. With respect to other sites within the Big Sunday network, the custodians of each language area have a particular interest in the section of the Blackfellow Dreaming track that passes through their own country. Consequently, when interpreting art sites within their own country, some men tend to stress the local significance over and above the regional significance. Both levels of significance have current social import; emphasis appears to be a matter of context and personal interest.

This certainly appeared to be the case when I discussed Ngarinman art sites with Daly Pulkara. He interpreted many motifs in terms of secret men's ritual, and mentioned the locally important site called Jutpara, but did not refer to the connection with the Bilinara. In contrast, Alan Young readily made the connection between the Bilinara site and Kanjul, one of the most important restricted men's sites (said to be an art site) on the Blackfellow Dreaming track in Karangpurru country.

When interpreting art sites from within Bilinara country, Daly Pulkara, Alan Young and Old Tim constantly made explicit the connection with the Bilinara site; the human figures were Dreaming Blackfellows on their way to the Bilinara site. Often the point of origin of these Dreaming Blackfellows outside Bilinara territory also was explicit.

In sum, the site called Bilinara, located in Bilinara language area, is of central importance for Bilinara people and for the language defined groups that surround Bilinara country, as well as being of significant interest to groups further afield. The Big Sunday ritual complex is made up of tracks and songs, which converge on Bilinara. Apart from the general acknowledgment of the importance of Bilinara, the members of each of the language groups surrounding Bilinara country have a particular interest in the sites on the Blackfellow Dreaming track that passes through their own country.

Much of the knowledge which connects the tracks and the local Dreamings of a given area is held by men who own that area, and for each area an emphasis on local connections may in some contexts be more germane to interpreting the art than the Bilinara connection which is taken as given.

The Centrality of Bilinara

One puzzling aspect of the Victoria River network is the centrality of Bilinara. In at least several of the surrounding language-defined areas there is a site on the track of the fully initiated Dreaming men travelling to Bilinara which is of major importance to local men. While such sites are regarded with the utmost respect by men who

are affiliated to that language group, and by men of other language groups, none of these sites achieves the same regional consensus of importance as does Bilinara.

In other aspects of Aboriginal life in the Victoria River region, and elsewhere, a key feature is the concept of balance and reciprocity (Myers 1986: 170; Turner 1985, 1987). This concept provides a central ethos of Aboriginal cosmology in the Victoria River region. For example, the great Dreaming beings, Rainbow snake and Sun, balance each other to create and perpetuate the cycle of the seasons (see Chapter 6). Similarly, each family or language group maintains a balance between itself and other groups; a promised wife is repaid with a promised wife, a murder attributed to a particular group is repaid by loss of life from that group, and so on. No one group is in any way more important than another group and each is an independent unit (as well as interdependent).

In a system based on reciprocity and independence, the centrality of Bilinara appears to be anomalous. I cannot state with any certainty how or why Bilinara attained this position, but it is critical to Aboriginal men's interpretation of the art.

Big Sunday and Rock Art

We have seen that most of the images seen on the rocks throughout the Victoria River district are regarded as the living presence of the Dreaming beings. Just as the various Dreaming beings in the region are part of an integrated network of meanings, the 'art sites' are also part of this network. For men, Big Sunday is the major configuration through which sites, and rock art, are held to be meaningful. The Dreaming beings that travelled to Bilinara interacted with localised Dreaming beings on their way.

I have documented portions of two major Dreaming tracks leading into Bilinara. One is in Karangpurru country, but as the sites I documented are not art sites I will not discuss them further. The other is Gordon Creek, in Bilinara country. In Chapter 9 I pointed out that the concentration of depictions of the Rainbow snake along Gordon Creek does not, as one might otherwise have deduced,

reflect a Rainbow snake Dreaming track. The concentration of Rainbow snake representations in this area has three possible reasons; the proximity of large waterholes which are always thought of as the home of Rainbow snakes, the existence of a major Rainbow snake Dreaming place on a tributary of Gordon Creek, and the movement along Gordon Creek of Dreaming Blackfellows travelling towards the site called Bilinara.

Only a small number of the many motifs in the Gordon Creek galleries seem to be explicable in terms of localised Dreaming presence; most are explicable in terms of Big Sunday mythology. For example, turtle and echidna were localised at Kupakalarni, and are common motifs in a number of galleries there. All of the men with whom I discussed the Kupakalarni galleries immediately referred to the turtle and echidna myth. However, in one instance a turtle depicted near a Rainbow snake was said to act as the Rainbow snake's pillow, a relationship noted in galleries away from Kupakalarni. In another instance, a line of human figures next to a turtle-echidna pair were said to be 'looking for them two' for food.

At the same time, the fish on a string at Jililijawun (Plates 92, 92; Figures 108, 109) were interpreted independently by Old Tim and Alan Young as fish caught by the 'Dreaming Blackfellows' and taken to Bilinara. A small human figure with round objects suspended from its elbows (Plate 152) was interpreted by Old Tim as a 'business man' carrying 'footballs' (balls of hair string) for ceremony. The oval objects in Figure 124 were interpreted by Tim Yilngayari as coolamons full of sugarleaf (manna), food for the Dreaming Blackfellows at the ceremony place, and the the unusual branched object as a tree with spears in the branches (see Plate 151). Alan Young interpreted the same motifs as sacred objects and a bush 'ladder', used by the Dreaming Blackfellows to negotiate the steep side of a creek bank. Many more examples could be given.

On Limbunya Station, in Malngin country, Meggitt (1955) documented a number of sites many of which his Aboriginal guides interpreted in terms of Big Sunday ritual. One site, a cave near the junction of Horse Creek and Stirling Creek, was an art site containing a frieze of human figures. Meggitt was told that these were '...a party of Big Sunday men...and youths'. At another site on

Stirling Creek, he was shown rocks which were identified as a group of Big Sunday men who were travelling upstream (ie east, towards Bilinara country).

Other Dreamings are associated with Bilinara in ways that are central to myth without actually going to the place. For instance, the Rain Dreaming travelled from the desert through to Wardaman country on Delemere Station. According to Alan Young, Rain never went to Bilinara. 'Only Jutpara him bin fall down', Jutpara being a Rain/Lightning site in Ngarinman country on the track of Dreaming people who travelled through to Bilinara. Similarly, the Two Dogs at Walkara in Mudbura country performed actions there which caused objects to be thrown to Bilinara and the surrounding area. One of these objects made sounds which are now reproduced during the Big Sunday ritual.

In sum, Dreamings become part of the ritual network irrespective of their presence at Bilinara. No Dreaming being travelled or acted in isolation; each of the Dreaming beings in the Victoria River district is part of an integrated network of meanings with, from local Aboriginal men's point of view, Bilinara being the key site in the Victoria River region and beyond.

12 CONCLUSIONS: ART AND SOCIETY

The relationship between style and social units in Victoria River rock art shows parallels to the management of this relationship in west Kimberley and in central and western Arnhem Land. Victoria River societies are part of a regional network of ceremonial relations. Analysis of the Victoria River rock art system reveals that there are different levels of meaning which are interconnected, and that ceremony provides the major interpretive framework. The art is not used to demarcate social units such as a family area, clan, or language-defined group. The only social-cultural unit that appears to be marked by art style is the culture area as defined by Peterson (1976). Before proceeding to an analysis of the culture area through time, I will briefly compare the Victoria River culture area with its neighbouring areas: west Kimberley and west and central Arnhem Land.

The Spatial Dimension

West Kimberley

Recent art in west Kimberley is characterised by the highly distinctive Wandjina style (eg Crawford 1968). In contrast to the earlier Bradshaw art, Wandjina art has received considerable attention from researchers (eg Elkin 1930; Love 1930; Crawford 1968; Blundell 1974, 1982; Blundell and Layton 1978; Layton 1985). According to Layton and to Blundell, clans, which in that area are patrilineal descent groups, are the fundamental social units in the west Kimberley. Each clan estate was established by a Wandjina ancestral being and each estate has one or more painted art galleries where the founding Wandjina is present as a rock painting. The Wandjina also established the social relationships between the clans through the founding of the *wunan*, a trade, marriage and kinship system. All the clans are interdependent; they are not residential units and clan members may be widely dispersed throughout other clan areas at various times of the year (Blundell 1974: 222, 1982: 6-9; Blundell and Layton 1978: 242; Layton 1985: 443).

It is clear that west Kimberley clans are of much greater importance than equivalent social units are in the Victoria River valley, yet there is no suggestion from any researcher that rock art style or stylistic variations were used as a marker of clan identity. In west Kimberley the distinctive west Kimberley art style appears to demarcate the Wandjina culture area as a whole, while the content of individual galleries - depictions of clan or totemic animals - may have served as markers of individual clan areas (Blundell 1974; Blundell and Layton 1978; Layton 1985)

In west Kimberley, the clan is a social unit of great significance. The major ceremonial gathering is an annual event held in each clan area and engaged in only by members of that clan. Each clan-based ritual ensures the fertility of a limited number of clan or totemic species and each clan is dependent on the ritual activity of other clans for the continuance of life in general. Bearing in mind that west Kimberley rock art style has not been analysed with social-geographic units in mind, it nevertheless appears that in that region, rock art style does not serve to distinguish the clan. As in the Victoria River district, rock art appears to mark the culture area.

West and Central Arnhem Land

Recent rock art in central and western Arnhem Land is characterised by the well-known X-ray style. Researchers such as Mountford (1956), Brandl (1973), Chaloupka (1984) and Lewis (1988a) have concentrated their attention on developing chronologies of styles and the relationship between recent art and social-geographical units has not received systematic study comparable to that of the Kimberley.

To date, the most intensive work on recent Arnhem Land art is that of Tacon (1987, 1988a, 1988b). Tacon examined the literature concerning the definition of Arnhem Land clan, tribe and language boundaries and points out that Arnhem Land social boundaries and social identities are highly flexible; there is considerable movement and interaction of people throughout the

region (Tacon 1987: 40-42). In west and central Arnhem Land a number of related ritual complexes operate concurrently (Taylor 1987: 143-53). This situation appears to have led to regionally homogeneous styles of recent art.

According to Chaloupka (1983: 13, 1984: 46, 1985: 277) there is 'noticeable spatial variation' in the way X-ray art is depicted in neighbouring language or even clan areas, but he does not present any evidence to substantiate his claims and Tacon makes no mention of stylistic differences that distinguish these social units. Instead, he remarks that 'traits change across space gradually, existing as clines of variation rather than discrete units.' (1987: 42-43). My own observations are in accord with Tacon's findings.

The relationship between rock art style and social unit in west and central Arnhem Land societies closely resemble that in the Victoria River valley. I would suggest that in such a socially fluid situation, the use of style or stylistic variation as a marker of difference is unlikely. Instead, I suggest that X-ray art - the characteristic west and central Arnhem Land rock art style - marks the culture area, and that smaller social units are not deliberately distinguished by style differences.

Wardaman Art

I have offered evidence to indicate that although closely related to Victoria River cultures, Wardaman culture has a number of distinctive characteristics. This distinctiveness also extends to rock art and I have described a number of significant differences between Wardaman rock art and rock art in other parts of the Victoria River valley. The only published study of the social dimensions of Wardaman rock art is that of Merlan (1989: 14-24). Her findings for Wardaman art are in general agreement with my own for the Victoria River valley.

According to Merlan, Wardaman people take locality as the most important factor in identifying art. The emphasis among Wardaman people is on patrilineally-defined units, and the logic of identification of motifs appears to follow a sequence such that if

one knows the patri-couple identity of a site one then knows the Dreamings associated with that patri-couple. Identification of motifs proceeds on the basis of knowledge of appropriate Dreamings.

Here again, the emphasis is on clan (patri-couple) territory, and interpretations are informed by knowledge of clan Dreamings. There is at present no indication that style marks Wardaman clan territories. Rather, knowledge of territory seems to be held by people, and the art is seen as an expression of social knowledge.

Summary

Although clans are of greater importance in west and central Arnhem Land, west Kimberley and Wardaman country than they now are in the Victoria River area, the rock art styles of all of these areas distinguish the culture area, rather than smaller social units such as clan or language area.

The Temporal Dimension

Within the past two hundred years a number of major events are believed to have affected Aboriginal societies in the Victoria River district. Some or all of these events may have modified people's relationship to rock art. Other important events certainly occurred in earlier times, but their effects are too far in the past to be accessible. For example, during the past 20,000 years major climatic changes have occurred across northern Australia, but such changes were gradual, allowing considerable time for adjustments to be made. By comparison, the changes to be considered here were almost instantaneous in their appearance and effects.

Subsections

By inference, McConvell (1985) suggests that subsections were adopted in the Victoria River district more than one century and

possibly several centuries ago (see Chapter 5). While a precise date cannot be determined, the introduction of subsections constituted a major reorganisation of social relationships, with probable alterations in relationships to land, modification to mythology, and possible influences on rock art.

Smallpox

Another change, devastating in its impact, was smallpox (see Chapter 5). The effects of smallpox may have included a heightened concern for fertility, increased competition among men for women, transfers of knowledge from women's domains to men's domains, and heightened ceremonial activity, men's ritual in particular. Sorcery may have flourished both as an expression of competition for women and as a means of explaining the disaster with which the survivors were attempting to cope (cf Lindenbaum 1979 for an analysis of the relationship between lethal disease and sorcery).

Invasion

The third event known to have affected Victoria River Aboriginal societies was the arrival of European settlers (Chapter 5). In brief, European settlement, probably combined with the effects of smallpox epidemics which occurred in the century before European invasion, resulted in an estimated population decline of 90-95% (Rose, in press) and the disruption of existing patterns of traditional life throughout the region.

Big Sunday

The fourth major event known to have occurred is the appearance of the Big Sunday ritual complex. I hypothesise that Big Sunday came into being as a direct response to the pressures of demographic imbalance resulting from the devastating impact of smallpox.

The Kajiri/Big Sunday ritual complex and the Kunapipi ritual complex are sometimes treated as one (eg Berndt and Berndt 1985: 243). Although closely related, and quite possibly derived from a common source, it seems clear that they have been separate rituals for a considerable time. Arndt (1965) states that in the Victoria River Downs area an early 'wild-time' religion called Kalwadi (Karawadi: now a restricted name) or 'Sunday Business' was being superseded by Kunapipi about the turn of century. While Stanner sometimes seems to conflate the two rituals, in one paper (1979: 84) he describes how the 'High Culture of the Victoria River' had been vivified by the spread of the Kunapipi early this century. John Avery (pers. comm.) reports that Wambaia people (on the northern Barkly Tableland east of Newcastle Waters; Map 1) once performed Big Sunday, but no longer do so because, they say, it is 'too dangerous'. Instead, they now perform Kunapipi.

The Kunapipi ritual appears to be a comparatively recent innovation; in most areas where it has been documented it was known to have arrived within historic times. The close relationship between Kunapipi and Big Sunday suggests that both may be of relatively recent origin, although Arndt's account indicates that Big Sunday is older. In the following discussion of the origins of Big Sunday, I look at evidence for the origin of both Kunapipi and Big Sunday.

Geographic Origins of Big Sunday

The earliest account of Kunapipi seems to be that of Spencer and Gillen (1904: 223) who observed a Kunapipi ritual being performed near Borroloola in 1902. They do not provide any information as to the origin of the ritual. Direct observations by other researchers are much more recent.

Stanner (1979: 61) states that the Kajiri ritual was brought to the Daly River country by several young Nangiomeri men who learnt it on the Victoria River, 'probably during the first world war'. It replaced an earlier cult of an 'All-Father', a 'local variant of the almost universal Rainbow snake', with one focusing on an 'All-

Mother'. It was still spreading and being consolidated in that region in the early 1930's (ibid: 84).

Berndt (1951: 13) and Meggitt (1966: 177) both state that the Kajiri/Big Sunday ritual complex spread into northern Warlpiri country from the north (ie from the Victoria River district) before they began field work there (1940's and 1950's respectively). Meggitt (1966: 147) further states that during the time of his field work (mid-1950's) it was a recent arrival among the Warramungu who had received it from the north, possibly the Roper River area.

Petri and Petri-Odermann (1970: 266-67) believed that the Worgaia ritual they observed at La Grange (Western Australia) in the 1960's had elements of Kunapipi ritual while Kolig (1981) reports that the Worgaia ritual being performed at Fitzroy Crossing during the 1960's did not have clear-cut Kunapipi/Gadjari elements. Kolig does say, however, that the name 'Woagaia' was a general name for peoples to the east of Fitzroy Crossing, and that Worgaia ceremonies arrived from the east (ie from the upper Victoria River/northern Tanami region).

Accounts of the origin of the Big Sunday cult have an important bearing on questions of continuity and change in the rock art of the Victoria River region, and elsewhere. Areas north, south, east and west of the Victoria River district are said to have received, or possibly received, the ritual from that region. However, there are no accounts of the Big Sunday ritual being introduced into the region for the first time.

In contrast with Aboriginal statements about Kunapipi origin in other areas, Victoria River Aboriginal men today do not regard Big Sunday as an 'imported' ritual complex. While the fully initiated Dreaming men came to Bilinara from outside the Bilinara language area, they converged from all directions, and today there is no suggestion that the *idea* of the cult is of anything but local Dreaming origin. There is enough information from other areas to infer a minimum time for its appearance.

Age of Big Sunday

Stanner's account (cited above) indicates that Big Sunday was present in the Victoria River district very early this century. An even earlier time scale is provided by Arndt (1965). Arndt's information about an early 'wild-time' religion (called Kalwadi) in the Victoria River district came from Kulumput, an aged man with Yungman, Bilinara and perhaps Wardaman affiliations. Arndt estimated that Kulumput was probably born in the late 1880's, and grew up at the time when the 'wildtime' religion was being superseded by Kunapipi. Arndt states that this was occurring in the Victoria River region, but the event may in fact have been happening further to the east.

There is no reason to doubt that his informant, Kulumput, had rights to and knowledge of Victoria River country as Arndt claims. However, Kulumput apparently grew up mostly in Wardaman country and spent a good deal of his adult life in Wardaman country or further to the east around Katherine (ibid: 245). The Kunapipi ritual is not performed in the Victoria River valley at the present time; there is no Aboriginal information and no unambiguous historic documentation to suggest that it was ever present there. It is possible that the conflict between the so-called 'wildtime religion' and the Kunapipi cult may have occurred in Wardaman country, but not among other Victoria River groups.

In any case, the precise location of the change from the 'wildtime religion' to Kunapipi is not of primary concern here. What is of significance is that apparently Kulumput regarded the 'Kalwadi' (Big Sunday) as an indigenous ritual, and was alarmed at the spread of the 'new' Kunapipi ritual. This indicates that the Big Sunday ritual was present in the Victoria River region well before the turn of the century.

Kulumput related a myth of the origin of Big Sunday. His account credits the Black-headed Python with having given this ritual to people. At the time of my research Big Sunday was still associated with the Black-headed Python, but the account of its origin had been substantially modified. It is difficult to establish an action

sequence within myth because myth collapses time. Indeed, it is difficult to determine whether myths incorporate historic events at all, a point subject to some debate (Hiatt 1975: 16; Sutton 1988b: 251-268; Keen 1988: 21-22). However, the fact that even in Kulumpu's day Big Sunday was accorded an indigenous Dreaming origin rather than an exogamous origin (via trade) indicates that during his childhood (pre-1900) the ritual was not a recent introduction.

A date well before the turn of the century for the appearance of the Big Sunday ritual is supported by several other lines of evidence. One is Elkin's suggestion that the Kunapipi had come to southern and north-eastern Arnhem Land from Victoria River, via Boorooloola (in foreword to Berndt 1951: xxii). If he is correct, then it must have spread from Victoria River in time for Spencer and Gillen (1904: 223) to encounter it there in 1902.

In sum, the accounts of Stanner, Arndt and Elkin indicate that the Big Sunday ritual was present in the Victoria River district by the late 1890's and it seems almost certain that the ritual first appeared some decades earlier. It is therefore not surprising that current Aboriginal belief is that the ritual originated in the local region and derives directly from the Dreaming.

Social Value of Big Sunday

There are several possible reasons why the Big Sunday ritual complex came into being and was adopted by successive groups over such a vast region. Stanner's work on the Daly River may point to one reason. At the time of his first visit, local Aborigines were emerging from a period of severe population loss and on-going sickness due to European contact. As a result, people felt that the efficacy of their own rituals had diminished and that Angamunggi, the 'All-Father', had 'gone away' (Stanner 1979: 84). Stanner remarked that the appearance of the Big Sunday ritual, based on the All-Mother, served to revivify local groups. The cult, he said, summoned 'a new life-principle to a dwindling and needy people' (1979: 61) and 'thus came at a beautifully appropriate time' (ibid: 84).

If the cult originally arose as a response to some form of social and demographic devastation, the effects of European settlement throughout the continent instantly spring to mind. Disruption of Victoria River societies and severe population decline began almost as soon as European settlers arrived in the region, in 1883. This may have led to the appearance of the Big Sunday cult, or it is possible that the cult arose in a region where European settlement began earlier, and arrived in the Victoria River region soon after initial settlement there. However, in light of the apparent age of the ritual, it seems more probable that it arose as a response to the effects of one or the other of the smallpox epidemics.

Kimber's hypotheses (Chapter 5) concerning the possible effects of the smallpox epidemics accord well with the recent social and ritual situation in the Victoria River district. Victoria River men say that they gained their secret ritual from women, although it should be remembered that this is an extremely widespread concept (Bamberger 1974). Fertility and sexuality are explicit themes of Big Sunday ritual. Local tradition has it that inter-group fighting over women was rife before and for some time after European settlement (see Chapter 5). Big Sunday is incorporative; the ritual binds together different groups over a wide area into a regional alliance.

Art and Change

The significant point to be made here is this: Within the past few hundred years at least five major events have occurred: the appearance of the eight-part subsection system, three probable smallpox epidemics, the appearance of the Big Sunday ritual complex, and the conquest of the region by Europeans. However, with the exception of a handful of motifs depicting contact items, and the *possible* appearance or increase of sorcery-motivated figures in the painted art, virtually no trace of these major events is recognisable in the art record.

How much of the existing Victoria River art predates the appearance of the Big Sunday cult and how much was created as a response to it is impossible to know. It should be noted, however, that in areas where the arrival of a new cult has been observed, the new cult is usually integrated into the pre-existing myth-sites complex (Elkin 1972: 168; Berndt and Berndt 1985: 243). Meggitt (1966: 195) reports, for example, that among the Warlpiri the 'old woman' of central importance in Big Sunday ritual to the north is transformed into two men. It seems highly likely that when a new cult appears, existing rock art is given new meanings relevant to the new cult.

The case for the stability of art in the face of social change can be documented to some extent for the past two centuries because there are historic sources on which to draw. This is not to suggest, however, that prior to 1788 Aboriginal social life may have been stagnant. It seems most reasonable to hypothesise that change was integral to Aboriginal life and that two major social constructs served to accommodate change within an over-arching framework of stability. Generalised art and orality can both be understood as ways of facilitating an interpretive epistemology in which the past is kept accountable to the needs of the present (cf Michaels 1987) and an ideology of stability is sustained.

Whether the current myth-sites focus on Bilinara existed before the appearance of Big Sunday is impossible to determine, but it is likely that the current ritual complex has incorporated earlier myths, sites and rock art. The generalised character of the art may be viewed as a mechanism assisting the control of knowledge; at the same time it allows change in meaning. The fact that the pecked engravings are generalised and some of these are undoubtedly very old, suggests that these features may be of very long standing.

Highly specific images may leave little room for variation in identification, but may nevertheless be given a multitude of meanings. Overall, generalised images provide greater scope for multiple meanings because of possible variations in first level identifications. Munn (1971: 335-355) made a similar point regarding variation between figurative and non-figurative art

systems or as she calls them, continuous and discontinuous systems. What I want to suggest here is that the Victoria River rock art system lies part way between the relatively 'continuous' Arnhem Land system as opposed to the relatively 'discontinuous' Western Desert system.

The lack of consistency in interpretations of the art is to be expected in oral cultures. The same situation applies in relation to myth; in the words of Stanner (1959: 84).

There is no univocal version...in my opinion, of *any* aboriginal myth. One is not dealing with dogmata or creeds, so there is no question of an authoritative or doctrinal form. Narrators may, and do, start or finish at somewhat different points; omit or include details; vary the emphases; describe events differently and attribute them to different causes and persons.

Berndt and Berndt (1985: 242), Wafer and Green (1989: 44), and others make much the same point. Such observations are equally applicable to Aboriginal interpretations of rock art; myths vary for a wide variety of reasons and rock art interpretations are largely derived via reference to myth.

Some aspects of Aboriginal cultures are more stable than others. While myths tend to be highly variable, songs, for example, tend to be stable over long periods (Wafer and Green 1989: 45). According to Meggitt (1966: 197) songs act as a mnemonic aid; in my view, they provide a relatively stable set of information opening into the variable domain of myth.

In recent years some scholars have begun to analyse orality as a specific kind of cultural system, rather than as a lack of literacy. Eric Michaels (1987: 113), for instance, compares the Warlpiri graphics system to writing and concludes that Warlpiri graphics are '...as close to what we call writing...as you can get without compromising the authority of human speakers and interpreters...'. 'Proof' of the authenticity of cultural propositions is placed in two domains: the (relatively) immutable landscape and the system of signs encoded in the land, and the performance of rituals (song, dance, art works). Wafer and Green (1989: 45) makes this point very clearly with respect to Arrente

rituals in which, '...the tradition is validated in a series of concrete situations, rather than by reference to an ideal model preserved in writing.'

I suggest that in Victoria River rock art, the artistic conventions, like songs and like the law itself, are relatively stable over long periods, and act as mnemonic aids. While their shape remains fixed as proof of the actions or the actual presence of the Dreamings, the meaning or interpretation of the motifs is highly variable. The generalised nature of much of the art greatly contributes to the flexibility in interpretations which is essential to accommodating change within an ideology of permanence.

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