

**Gwion Gwion Rock-art of the Kimberley: Past, Present and Future**

**University of Western Australia**

**14-15 October 2010**

**ALL IS NOT AS IT SEEMS ...**

**by**

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I want to start by voicing a rather uncomfortable, but persistent awareness of the unacknowledged elephant in the room. It is this. **Academic research in all things Indigenous appears to be designed and conducted on the premise that contemporary Indigenous culture is remnant prehistoric hunter-gatherer culture from which Western civilization eventually progressed and evolved.** Evidence of this presumption abounds. Nowhere in the palette of 'Australia' do Indigenous Law, belief and knowledge systems co-exist equally with Western epistemologies and discourses; not law, not education and learning, not health, not science, not archaeology and anthropology, not ... the list is comprehensive. It seems that Indigenous knowledge and knowledge-holders are universally regarded by every sector of constituted, institutional Australia as 'of the deep human and cultural past' rather than as fully evolved, modern peoples living in a coinciding but different tradition. The implicit value judgement seems to be that these are **a remnant people whose evolution was somehow arrested thousands of years ago.** Why? Because, unlike Europeans, they did not evidently, develop agricultural land use and progress naturally to husbandry and settlement living? Or perhaps because they allegedly did not evolve reflexivity or intellectualism on this 'natural' journey to the evidentiary scientific discourse of 'Homo-Briticus'. And it begs a question: if Indigenous people and culture are not a contemporary society of humans, then who and what are they?

The Social Darwinian assumption applied to modern indigenous people living in hunter-gatherer belief and knowledge systems is not simply scientifically incorrect; it is deeply offensive. That this perception underlies the prevailing ideologies and discourses that shape the political view is evident in current government policy, the academy, and all institutions of our nation. As a result of this presumption, virtually no comprehensive or systematic attention or resources have been invested in the acknowledgement, exploration, adaptation or restitution of living, Indigenous cultural systems, so that this land's two cultural systems might enjoy equal status and standing.

As a case in point, none of the Indigenous people here, not to mention those absent Ngarinyin, Worrora and Wanumbal knowledge holders of the subject culture hold any formal qualifications to speak on their own rock art. Knowledge and experience - yes, but qualifications? Institutionally unlettered cultural knowledge-holders are often and inevitably considered an accessory to legitimate academic discussion and debate. As a result, the authoritative knowledge holders of the Gwion Gwion phenomenon do not enjoy the same level of credibility, status or authority, or attract an equivalent remuneration, that their counterparts in the Western intellectual tradition enjoy.

Two Way Thinking.

My experience derives from 35 years of friendship with Ngarinyin lawman David Mowaljarlai who taught me to see my own culture through the eyes and experiences of the other; our two families and our respective countrymen have a long, shared story that has demanded continual adjustment to two cultural ways of being in the world. Mowaljarlai and I called this, Two Way Thinking. Two Way Thinking has included navigating each other's children and grandchildren in two laws, values and customary behaviours, co-cultural education and training, co-cultural private enterprise, and co-cultural domestic living. From this littoral space where our two epistemologies meet, merge and retreat back into themselves, my perspective is neither academically Western nor Ngarinyin, yet, like many Indigenous knowledge holders, I am the product of both.

Mowaljarlai and I believed that our experience and practice of working in Two Way partnership might reach, and be relevant to, an even broader church. We worked together at many conferences, media events and workshops. As Mowaljarlai and Ngarinyin kids and countrymen were frequent visitors and cohabitants in my home, people who wanted to meet him, listen at his campfire evenings, or interview him often visited the farm in Gidgegannup, a familiar and culturally comfortable environment. He was interviewed at my place for a Channel 9 Sunday Program segment on Grahame Walsh's work. Here is an example of how Western institutions sometimes subtly, sometimes blatantly, patronise and diminish knowledge holder authority. What went to air on Channel 9 was a carefully edited attack on Mowaljarlai, and the Ngarinyin's 'change of mind' about the significance of the Gwion Gwion, allegedly to shore up their Native Title claim. It was a disgraceful mockery of not just Mowaljarlai, but of all senior Ngarinyin knowledge-holders. In the context of our Two Way Thinking partnership, I also accompanied Mowaljarlai to Melbourne where he was booked to appear with Dr David Tacey and Michael Leunig at Melbourne University; this was a very respectful event and an enjoyable experience. Later, we attended as guests at a fund-raising lecture series on Kimberley rock art, organised by Walsh's sponsors Alan and Maria Myers under the philanthropic patronage of Dame Elizabeth Murdoch. Mowaljarlai was of the understanding that, unlike the Channel 9 experience, this time his people's knowledge was to be afforded a respectful hearing.

The forum was held in a largish auditorium with more than 200 people in attendance. These included many Walsh devotees, pastoralists, miners, and good-willed people of Melbourne. Speakers appeared on a floodlit stage at a microphoned lectern, with access to the equivalent of Powerpoint technology. Mowaljarlai and I sat halfway back in the auditorium for Walsh's slideshow and folksy chat and subsequent academic presentations. From this dark space, we witnessed the Indigenous knowledge of the Gwion Gwion graphically and anecdotally eroded, discredited and infantilised by Mr Walsh. A number of experts including Mike Morwood, Bert Roberts and John Mulvaney followed, each of whom, while distancing themselves from Walsh's thesis, supported and

admired his energy and work. Mowaljarlai was upset by the tone, content and order of the presentations. He was not familiar, comfortable or experienced with the Western adversarial model where the rules of engagement lead to an absolute 'either/or' conclusion, yet this was how the presentations gradually unwrapped. As Walsh and others had already conditioned the audience to doubt the veracity and credibility of the Ngarinyin view of the Gwion Gwion, Mowaljarlai felt he was on the back foot of a battle he didn't know he was in. During the break we left the event, despite the Myers' pleadings for Mowaljarlai to stay and put 'his case'. But he was not there to 'present a case', nor to 'defend' Ngarinyin story; he presumed he was there as a senior knowledge holder to relate the Ngarinyin story to a receptive, hopefully appreciative audience. This event did not reflect a culturally acknowledging Two Way Thinking model. Its structure, venue and rules of engagement were all Western. Mowaljarlai's response was the same as most people's might be in an imposed, unfamiliar, culturally discordant paradigm ... while some may respond with anger, he tended to withdraw from participation where conflict or loss seemed inevitable.

I now turn to the relationship between Indigenous knowledge-holders and academic researchers. With the exception of film maker Jeff Doring's and named Ngarinyin knowledge-holders' film, and subsequent book, I know of no other published research that reflects a 'side-by-side' relationship between the two cultures. There are other collaborations between Lawpeople and individual whitefellas in which the Indigenous voice finds a platform, but these do not reflect the Indigenous way of knowledge acquisition, knowledge communication, or knowledge as lived. My own books fall into this category. Glimpses of the ways in which Ngarinyin see, and live in, the world are offered, but that is all they are: glimpses. With rare exceptions where research is undertaken at the request of Indigenous people, it is overwhelmingly conducted at the initiative of academics, conceived and structured according to the interests (and often, academic aspirations) of the particular researchers, and executed on site within very specific parameters and methodology. None of these elements either reflects or facilitates an exploration or representation of Indigenous beliefs and knowledge, nor do they reflect or relate to the Indigenous way of being in the

world, and the imagery's place in that lived experience. Despite the Kimberley Land Council's efforts to ensure Traditional elders' participation, even 'partnership', in reality Blackfellas are peripherally involved as project 'consultants' to an essentially Western inquiry. The relationship between cultures is not equal; most projects are simply a continuation of colonial and modern Western thinking, now with some political sensitivities that deliver on-site work opportunities that represent Indigenous inclusivity.

The paintings.

From my Bush University teachers I have learned that Kimberley rock art does not exist as a discrete arcane phenomenon, unrelated to any living peoples. Rather, the images represent a coherent jurisprudence, an integral dynamic in the ontology and epistemology of a contemporary culture's living people, in other words, a constituted Law. Professor Desmond Manderson states, 'Law is a social fact and it is past time that we learnt to talk about it using the whole chocolatory language of our social world - art, poetry, children's books, movies, newspapers, the lot.' (Manderson, p 2) For Wanjina countrymen Law is living action; a verb rather than a noun, as Manderson suggests. He goes further by asserting that law abides in language and literatures wherein story is not about the law. It *is* law. '... stories do not tell us what to do, externally, but transform who we are, internally. And the most powerful, or perhaps the most complex and ambiguous, or perhaps again the most flexible, of these stories become myths - a vibrating string which sets in motion a hundred harmonic frequencies whose connections have been built up over many generations. Myth is just this: the *fusion* of literature and law.' (Manderson, p 5) This certainly describes my understanding of the Ngarinyin, Worrora and Wunambul reality.

Western methodologies are regarded by many Indigenous knowledge-holders as head-shakingly curious.

*Mowaljarlai rarely answered questions with an abstract explanation; he always told a story. His was not a fragmented world, divided into the convenient disciplinary languages and jargon that seem to be required for*

*the understanding of concepts and principles in, for example, mathematics, physics, art and literature. Not only did he not have these languages; he thought this was a strange way to arrive at understanding the way in which the world lives in itself. It baffled him that whitefellas developed their knowledge by 'busting things up', reducing things to little pieces separate from everything else that contributes to their nature. For him, everything in creation is not only living and interconnected, but exists in a story and story cycle. Yet, his knowledge of what whitefellas call 'science' was extraordinary. It was from Mowaljarlai that I learned that 'lightning go up (from the earth) ... then 'e go down!' The banman frog spits into the atmosphere, creating a conduit through which lightning passes on its way into the earth. With a story, Mowaljarlai revealed that energy grids striate the subsurface of the land through which lightning travels, just as it does above the clouds, above and below in reflection of each other. (Storymen 81)*

I don't have the authority or depth of knowledge to speak in detail about the Gwion Gwion, or for that matter, any specific story cycle or songline. However I can share the way I have learned to see and be in the landscape. The Ngarinyin way of being in the world embodies insight gleaned from the visual and experiential that involves the imaginal and meditative. My experience of Kimberley landscape and the natural world exists in that littoral place between two cultures, each of which informs me in its own discourse. Through Western eyes and the vehicle windows, I see geological formations, gorges, watercourses, vegetation patterns and the like, classifying each element by name and schoolgirl science as we travel from fuel stop to fuel stop between camping grounds. As we walk around we talk, often about things far removed from the present - kids, politics, the economy, pausing every so often to focus on something that catches the eye. For the most part, the environment passes us by invisibly because our minds are elsewhere - in the past, the future, or on discussing an issue or project.

When I'm in country with Ngarinyin family and friends, it's more like, 'this where crocodile lay eggs,' 'trees dancing hip to hip there', 'that little boy, his snot all

along that ridge til he stop at the end there', 'this that place where Wodoi and Djingun made that agreement - everything in wunan now'. It's a tapestry of story-threads, their shapes and placements woven into an all-embracing coherent epistemology. In this experience, time warps, colour brightens, the mind's focus is, not on beauty or aesthetic appreciation, but on patterns, relationships, energies, and food. We move slowly, alert for sounds, cloud movement, sun position, smells, wind shifts, evidence of animal, insect and bird activity, the taste and texture of water, all the while observing the human relationship system's obligations in physical position, gender, age, authority and forms of address. We are fully present in the present, and absorb knowledge as experience.

These are completely different cultural experiences of country. In the Western experience we move through the world largely in our heads - observing and analysing, synthesising stuff as we go. In the Ngarinyin experience we inhabit the world as participants in its action. In the Ngarinyin Kimberley, art, song and dance, are texts that are integrated in the tapestry of a living context, woven and inhabited by humans and non-humans alike.

Next I want to address the relationship between subject visual images - the Gwion Gwion in this workshop, and cultural epistemologies. I don't want to say any more about the archaeological view and methodology, but I do want to share a Ngarinyin view. At the 1988 ...Retouch Symposium of the First Congress of the Australian Rock Art research Association in Darwin, Mowaljarlai, in an impassioned plea, said:

*Someone told me just recently that 'rock art is dead'. If 'Art' was dead, that would not matter to we Aborigines. We have never thought of our rock paintings as 'Art'. To us they are images.*

*IMAGES with ENERGIES ...*

*We ... dance those images back into the earth in corroborees. That makes us learn the story, to put new life into those IMAGES. ...*

*Aborigines know that they stimulate the energies that bring increase and renewal by retouching sacred objects, painting or repainting, talking to the images, and dancing and singing at important sites.*

*Instead of talking about 'Rock Art', we should be thinking about our responsibility to keep all things of Nature alive, to STIMULATE those places the way Aborigines have always done in the past. ... This is my statement about 'Rock Art'.*

*(Antiquity 62 (1988): 690-6, cited in Ward, 1992)*

My understanding of the Gwion Gwion and Jillinga, and after them Wanjina, Wunggud Snake, Chosen Animals, Agula and Dumby, and many more, are elements of a coherent, thousands of years'-old jurisprudence that, like the 110 - year old Australian legislative archive, represents the evolution over time of many stages in community consciousness and awareness. In his later years Mowaljarlai tried to bring his knowledge system into mainstream consciousness. One project was to retrieve a living rock art gallery by stencilling it to canvas. (Storymen Pp 94 - 97) The Negomorra site (located on Doongan Station, now owned by the Myers' Dunkeld Pastoral Company), contains many pieces of a mapped story that traverses thousands of square miles of landscape and thousands of years of jurisprudence in the form of images and stories. These stories exist, not just in the images painted in the shelters, but in the surrounding landscape's flora, fauna and geology. Land, nature and images are all elements of the one knowledge system. I mention this to drive the point that theirs is not an extinct Law and culture; it is essentially modern, continually evolving to reflect and anticipate current conditions.

The future.

My understanding of the Ngarinyin view of being in the world locates it methodologically in the Goethian phenomenological grain rather than in any other academic or scientific method. It demands that research is based on experiencing the experience in accordance with the Indigenous Law in the land. Only in this context can knowledge holders share deep knowledge. By looking at the natural world through Ngarinyin eyes, the coherence of relationship between

humans and their context becomes visible. For example, the shapes of the Gwion Gwion, Wanjina images in the sky that foreshadow wet weather, the Lightning Brothers appearing as small storm heads whisking across the sky, Wunguud Snake as rainbow, and creator of watercourses. The emergence of a jurisprudence as well as the evolution of conscious awareness, social relations, and a body corporate mixed in the layered ochres of paintings, even the source and meaning of the ochres themselves, weave a tapestry of a coherent, explicable worldview. The logic, and the intrinsic knowledge are all evident in song, story, body and cave painting, ceremony and ritual, musical patterns, moiety, clan estates, in other words, a particular way of being in the world in relational balance. What is clear to me is that this epistemology, derived from a profound ontology, has yet to find its place, side by side in this country's academic, social and political discourses.

Manderson asks, 'Can it be done? Can Indigenous people ... go beyond defining themselves in the legal or political categories given to them by the dominant culture, and instead change those definitions or priorities themselves? Or are they destined always to speak in the language and with the arguments of others?' (P 8) One of the latest buzz phrases is 'capacity building', which, when applied to Indigenous communities means empowering and skilling local people to manage their own affairs. In archaeological research, 'capacity building' ought to be a Two Way process whereby Whitefellas 'capacity build' the skills and resources of Blackfellas to record their story, and Blackfellas 'capacity build' the knowledge and understanding of Whitefellas, to enrich their story.

This Two Way Thinking process acknowledges that the Indigenous people of Australia belong to a co-existing but different cultural complex of the modern era, and as such, deserve to find expression and respect as equal knowledge holders in Australian society. Their narrative or story needs to be told in their own languages be these dance, art, song or whatever, at their own pace, in their own country, according to their own Law. These records need to be held in the same esteem and ascribed the same authority as are Western scientific reports, by governments, institutions and resource developers. Their voice needs to be

heard on the same platforms and afforded the same respect as eminent knowledge holders of any other culture.

But what role can archaeology play?

Quite a significant one in my view. In fact archaeologists and Indigenous knowledge holders might jointly conduct research that reflects the two cultural methodologies. For example, put simply, ask the same questions of each group:

What do you want to study?

What methodology might be appropriate?

What protocols must be observed?

How can this be achieved?

Who can/should be involved?

How might it be recorded?

How might this knowledge be published, by whom, and with what credits?

Who would own the copyrights and receive royalties?

How would research be financed?

At what rates would knowledge-holders be remunerated? And so on.

The Kimberley Region is currently experiencing unprecedented pressure from Western development opportunities, namely, resource extraction and refining industries. All development stakeholders currently operate within the One Way Western paradigm that at best, consults with Aboriginal people, until there is disagreement or simply failure to agree. Then the heavy hand of unilateral declaration comes down. As we have surely learned from our participation in Iraq and Afghanistan, imposed change generates fierce resentment and resistance: the use of force breeds enduring hatred. This should ring loud warning bells to all involved in Kimberley development and research. In this climate, archaeological research has an unprecedented and potentially significant role to play.

It can do things as it has always done, and continue to generate local community resistance, even hatred.

It can pioneer a Two Way Thinking model and process that exemplifies mutual capacity building along the lines outlined above.

Or it can stand side-by-side Indigenous people in seeking the full cooperation and support of governments, institutions and organisations like the Kimberley Foundation to embark on a comprehensive co-cultural, Two Way Thinking program of mapping the Kimberley in two cultural methodologies.

Such an initiative would provide Australia and the world with the first-ever parallel stories of human habitation, and represent an unprecedented groundbreaking model for all governments and developers throughout Australia and the world.

To achieve this, my culture needs to embark on the steepest learning curve we have yet faced.

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