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REPAINTING OF IMAGES ON ROCK IN AUSTRALIA AND THE MAINTENANCE OF ABORIGINAL CULTURE [1988]

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Introduction

This paper has grown out of public and private discussions at the First AURA (Australian Rock Art Research Association) Congress held in Darwin (NT), Australia, in August 1988. DM is a traditional Aboriginal 'lawman' concerned to make his viewpoint known to a wider audience following controversy over the repainting of images in rock-shelters in his territory,

A highlight of the AURA Congress was the participation of Australian Aboriginal people. They and their ancestors are the source of the painted and engraved images discussed in Australian sections of the conference and seen on field excursions.

Aboriginal participation at the Congress took several forms. Site managers from Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney presented papers. Two Aboriginal leaders gave keynote addresses: the Chairman of the Northern Land Council, and the President of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. A skilled painter from the Malgawo outstation in Arnhem Land painted a specially constructed 'rock-shelter wall' in the foyer of the conference venue, while his wife painted images in the same tradition on bark. David Mowaljarlai, of the Mowanjum community near Derby in Western Australia, participated in two sessions, sharing a paper with Patricia Vinnicombe on the significance of the pictures in the northwestern Kimberley district, and contributing to the symposium on retouch which was initiated as a result of the controversial Gibb River repainting project.

In opening the symposium, the convenor, Graeme Ward, emphasized the broader question of the validity of repainting, with particular regard to the role of retouch and repainting in restoring painted images so as to maintain the cultural integrity of sites; it was important to attempt to understand why people with a long history of painting and repainting sites did this, and not be bound by a particular outsider's cultural perception. In his contribution, Mowaljarlai provided the cultural perspective of his community; Grahame Walsh (Takaraku Rock Art Research Centre, Queensland) showed

photographs taken before and after the repainting and argued that the work had not been done well; George Chaloupka (Northern Territory Museum of Arts and Sciences) showed examples of non-Aboriginal-inspired and poorly done painting at sites in Arnhem Land; John Clarke (conservator) and Peter Randolph

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(Department of Aboriginal Sites, Western Australian Museum) presented material based on their report to the Western Australian authorities: David Lambert (New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service) provided a case study of 'retouch' in a different context – the cleaning of rock engravings in the Sydney sandstone so as to enhance their visibility, which had met with approval from the Aboriginal community and increased visitor appreciation. In discussion, varying viewpoints were expressed. Some questioned whether repainting was 'traditional' or a recent innovation, whether people were qualified to repaint and would do it well; others expressed concern about the effect of repainting on the 'national heritage'.

In this paper, we question the validity of classing the Kimberley images purely as 'rock art'. They are indeed pictures painted on natural rock surfaces, but the simple phrase, setting the Kimberley images into an academic class alongside those of Palaeolithic France or Bronze-Age Sweden, overlooks their role in Aboriginal society. 'Rock art' places the images within 'art', and 'art' is itself a contentious category once one moves outside that recent Western tradition in which fine art has a reasonably clear definition and a special place. Central to that place is the veneration of art as object, valued for its antique authenticity, and restored to what it used to be. So medieval altarpieces, if of sufficient 'quality', are taken from the churches for which they were painted and where they may still have a religious place as sacred images, and removed instead into secular art galleries, alien and sterile places where they are revered instead as objects of agnostic detachment.

Most rock-art is relatively ancient, being the relics of people and cultures that are dead, remote from and usually alien to those who study it. Seen in this secular and scientific way, 'rock-art' is abstracted and treated as the subject-matter of archaeological and art-historical studies, of aesthetics, or as evidence for some generalized 'palaeopsychology'. These are all valid approaches to the study of images on rock, all of them within the Western tradition of 'art as object' and, within that tradition, of its study by the methods of a detached science. In contrast to this Western academic view of 'art as object' is the view of 'art as process', in which the active process of making the art, the uses to which it is put and the place in which it is made or used are more significant than the art object itself (Forge 1973; Layton 1981).

An Aboriginal perspective

David Mowaljarlai's contribution to the symposium stressed the importance and significance of a range of sites in terms of Aboriginal cosmology. As with other Australian Aboriginal communities, the Ngarinyin linguistic group, of which Mowaljarlai is a traditional leader, has a strongly felt commitment to the land – their country – from which they came and which sustains them. A major expression of this commitment is made by maintenance of traditional sites which, as the focus of ritual activities and a necessary component of Ngarinyin religion, may be painted. These painted images must be maintained as an expression of the Community's commitment to the religious order.

David Mowaljarlai's statement

This is how David Mowaljarlai described his obligations:

"Someone told me 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 that keep us ALIVE EVERY PERSON, EVERYTHING WE STAND ON, ARE MADE FROM, EAT AND LIVE ON.

“Those IMAGES were put down for us by our Creator, Wandjina, so that we would know how to STAY ALIVE, make everything grow and CONTINUE what he gave to us in the first place. We should dance those images back into the earth in corroborees. That would make us learn the story, to put new life into those IMAGES. The message we read in our rock paintings is like a bible written all over our country. In those images we read HOW THE CREATOR MADE NATURE FOR US and how he put us in charge TO LOOK AFTER IT ON HIS BEHALF.

“We read the sacred messages in our rock paintings, from the stones and from the earth images. A single man reads it for himself – once he is taught how to read and understand it – then he is initiated. Women too have their responsibilities to the land – women can be bosses of the country too.

“When young men and women finish their

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initiations and marry according to tradition. they join the adults in sharing responsibilities for the land. The messages that initiated men and women read and experience from all those images in the bush are FROM THE BEGINNING.

“The story in our rock-images is direct. That’s why we must look after the images so that life on earth will continue. (I have put it all down in a book. about the history in our country. the Kimberley. It will be published soon [Malnic and Mowaljarlai in preparation.]

“We only have four old men, four *banman* or ‘men of high degree’, left in our area who know the full story. We need to teach the young men and women; to teach them about bush learning, the old stories and about the message of the images, so that they can continue to look after the country. That’s why we, the old men, started to train the young people. A very important part of this training was for them to learn about repainting – body-painting for ceremonies and to renew the painted images on rock.

“Last year, we [the Wanang Ngari Corporation] applied for funds under the Community Employment Programme so we could do this repainting. In our application we said that we wanted to conserve Wandjina paintings and to train young Aboriginal people to maintain these sites forever. We said that we would do this by recording sites and their stories, by repainting some sites using traditional methods and materials, and by cleaning up those sites, fencing them off from cattle and putting up some signs. At a big meeting we decided that we would only repaint sites that were faded and needed repainting. Photographs were taken at each site before any repainting took place, and John Clarke and Peter Randolph will show some of these photographs later. We talked to the custodians of the sites and they agreed that the repainting should be done. An elder was present at each site when it was repainted and told the stories about the place and showed the young people how to repaint the sites. We did these things at eight sites in the Gibb River area.

“Twelve young people were involved, with a co-ordinator and the elders. We used three colours from quarries in the Kimberley. The elders instructed the young people how to grind and mix ochre. Mostly figures were repainted as they were but sometimes where the earlier work had faded we put in our own ideas of what had been there before.

“We know that some people were critical that we had repainted images and what they would call ‘art sites’: we did not set out to upset other people. But people should know and they should understand that it is very important to us to repaint our sites – in this way we look after our country. By training young men and women we can ensure that our country continues to have somebody to look after it.

“Aborigines know that they can stimulate the energies that bring increase and renewal by touching sacred objects, painting or re-painting, 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. BOTH BLACK AND WHITE PEOPLE should understand about the IMPORTANCE OF ROCK-IMAGE SITES AND THAT THE EARTH IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN PEOPLE. We all come from the earth, live from the earth, and go back to the earth.

“This is my statement about ‘rock art’”.

Kimberley ideology and the maintenance of Sites

This statement by David Mowaljarlai draws on a belief system widely held in the northwestern Kimberley. The ideology binds together four linguistically different groups, each of which recognizes multiple patrilineal clan estates within their tribal territory. The Aboriginal people believe that each estate was created by ancestral beings collectively named Wandjina who, after creative journeys which left the land and all living matter in its present form, painted themselves in a rock-shelter in the clan estate. Each Wandjina has a name, a moiety and a set of totemic symbols from which each clan is directly descended.

Associated with each creative journey is a set of songs, myths and ceremonies which derive from a Wandjina and which become the property of the clan members who are believed to have descended from that Wandjina. It is the responsibility of the clan to look after the paintings left behind by Wandjina, and to perform the ceremonies necessary for the perpetuation of the totemic symbols associated with the estate (Blundell 1974; Blundell and Layton 1978).

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The ancestral Wandjina are closely associated with rain, fertility, and continuity. An integral part of the ceremonies associated with the perpetuation of the species and the maintenance of a proper order, is the maintenance and renewal of the painted images initially left by Wandjina. It is believed that failure to carry out these duties could result in mal-function of the natural order and punishment of the people who fail to comply with the laws set by Wandjina.

The tradition of repainting Wandjina sites is well testified in the anthropological literature (Love 1930; Elkin 1931; Lommel 1959; Crawford 1968), and any perceptive visitor to Wandjina sites will readily identify, through the study of superpositions, the stylistic shift over time from elongated Wandjina to more stocky representations. It can be seen that Wandjina sites have been subject to the repainting of selected motifs over a long period of time. In some cases entire panels have been repainted, first obliterating the original panel under a background coating of white paint, and then repainting similar but not identical subject matter on top of the original paintings. One investigator identified paint up to 5 mm thick, with over 40 distinct layers in places (Clarke 1978: 59). However, the facts relating to repainting in the Kimberley are not well known outside a small fraternity, and the revival of the repainting tradition in 1987 after an extended period of social and cultural dislocation, caused reactions of shock and horror among those who do not share the same cultural traditions (Randolph and Clarke 1987; Bowlder 1988; Walsh 1988).

The crux of the differing viewpoint centres around culturally specific notions of nature and of culture, differences which may be observed between all industrialized and non-industrialized societies (Levi-Strauss 1978: 320). Among the majority of western European scholars, the principal objective is to study and preserve painted sites in order to appreciate them as a hallmark of past human achievement. Culture is perceived

essentially as a product resulting from human endeavour, and a distinct division may be drawn between what is natural and what is cultural.

In the Aboriginal conceptual framework, nature and culture are an inter-related and continuous process. Aboriginal mythological beings were the precursors of humankind, and their exploits not only ordered the physical world and its resources, but also set the pattern for social order and cultural practices. The natural environment therefore evidences a spiritual and cultural past which sets the pattern for spiritual and cultural continuity. Natural resources are believed to have been created by cultural deeds which decree that those resources must be used with care, respect and deference. Aboriginal exploitation of the environment is not, in the sense of spiritually distanced industrialized societies, a detached relationship, but one which is surrounded by rules, prohibitions and observances, culturally transmitted from one generation to the next (Robinson 1986).

The painting and engraving of images on rocks is similarly construed by Aboriginal people to transcend the dividing line between nature and culture. Art in the Kimberley is perceived as a tangible inheritance from the spiritual past for which the Aboriginal people have been charged with clear social responsibilities. They believe that for the intrinsic power of the image to remain effective, it must be cyclically renewed in the same way that nature is cyclically renewed. Life cannot be stagnated by study and preservation. Life moves in a never-ending cycle, and interruption of that cycle may result in chaos and death.

Opposing approaches to non-literate images on rock may be accommodated when simply viewing the images or performing activities centred around them, but an intractable dilemma is caused when it comes to physical alteration of the paintings. Western priorities lie with preserving the images within an aura of antiquity. Aboriginal priorities lie with the spiritual power of the ancestral paintings which, in order to remain powerful and meaningful to present and future generations, need to be spiritually recharged and freshened by repainting.

Conservation in the Western perception constitutes the preservation of static images for all time; conservation from the Aboriginal perspective means visible and tangible continuity of the spiritual content of the image. Practical resolution of the dilemma highlighted by the Kimberley project would seem to lie in an ability to formulate conservation strategies that accommodate both Western and Aboriginal viewpoints.

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In a recent review paper presented as a background for the development of a State conservation strategy for Western Australia, the Registrar of Aboriginal Sites, who is responsible for the administration of the Western Australian *Aboriginal Heritage Act*, stressed that failure to recognize the differing perceptions would risk the omission of an important aspect of the State's heritage (Robinson 1986). This heritage includes one of the world's longest unbroken painting traditions; to impede the continuation of that tradition would be to contribute to the stagnation and ultimate demise of that culture.

David Mowaljarlai's statement printed above demonstrates that the concepts regarding the vital cultural role of rock-paintings in the Kimberley are still very much alive and well, even if somewhat precariously balanced on the scales of Old World, New World and Third World philosophies. An adequate conservation strategy would not only recognize the importance of the Aboriginal cultural legacy, but should seek to draw upon the richness of Aboriginal beliefs about the environment in developing a sensitive and complementary approach to its protection. Indeed, an essential prerequisite in shaping such a strategy would be direct Aboriginal consultation and participation, with the right for Aboriginal people to determine, insofar as it is possible in an overwhelmingly dominant Western society, their own cultural destiny (Robinson 1986; Gamble 1986).

Discussion

Bowdler's discussion (1988: 521-523) summarizes the project's implications for archaeologists, and concludes, '... it seems safe to suggest that no great archaeological loss has been sustained'. We agree with that conclusion, and here add further comments, especially points arising in the Darwin discussions.

The freshness and brilliance of the newly repainted images can be surprising, as the before/after pair illustrated in colour in the last number shows (*Antiquity* 62: Plate 3). The common non-Aboriginal expectation is that painted images will be pale, low in contrast and generally 'faded' – an expectation that reflects the centuries that have usually elapsed since the pictures that archaeologists study were last painted. A similar astonishment, and some apprehension, has been occasioned by the current cleaning of Michelangelo frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, Rome, which in recent times have been seen through a patina of darkened varnish.

Walsh's Darwin paper succinctly expressed a variety of concerns about the Gibb River repainting project – what had been done, who it was done by, and with whose consent; Walsh concluded that some of Australia's greatest galleries had been irreparably destroyed.

Behind reservations about the validity and calibre of the Gibb River repainting is a great fear, expressed in the sub-title of Walsh's paper, "Can a claim of Aboriginal descent establish curation rights over mankind's cultural heritage?", and in his asking, "Whether a claim of Aboriginal descent (at any level) provides any individual with the right to do as they wish with examples of rock art considered to be the cultural heritage of all mankind. This situation holds the potential to jeopardize the survival of every example of Australian rock art."

Recent Australian legislation, reversing the old policy of 'assimilation', is giving Aboriginal representatives considerable and increasing power to control archaeological material and archaeological sites, and to have them treated as they see fit. This may include removal from collections and reburial of skeletal material (Webb 1988). Legislation is increasingly in terms of the essential consideration of 'Aboriginality': that Aboriginal culture should be under the control of Aboriginal people. Some consequences are disturbing archaeologically. Material of great age, such as Pleistocene human remains, is treated in just the same way as material that is only a century or two old. Control may be given, especially in the southeast of Australia where White impact has been most devastating, to individuals who – however sincere in their wish to recover and re-make a Koori cultural identity – stand in very slight continuity of cultural tradition to the ancient Aboriginal people whose relics these are.

Chippindale, as the non-Australian co-author of this paper, is very struck by the low morale of some Australian archaeologists concerning future management of archaeological matters. Aborigines are now almost invariably involved, and so are a variety of other powers-that-be, among them those sometimes called 'gatekeepers' – the people who mediate between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal interests. Many

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professional archaeologists consider that their concerns and opinions no longer carry weight. Perhaps broader political questions now so dominate this arena that the future of archaeological resources and of academic studies will be decided – or simply ignored – in the face of harder political bargaining. Only when conclusions are produced that may have value in that wider sphere – an archaeological demonstration of the great antiquity of Aboriginal settlement in the continent, or (conversely) an archaeological admission that such-and-such a site is not unique and may perhaps be sacrificed – do its players take notice, and then for the purposes of their own larger game.

If this is the reality of the political place of archaeology in Australia today, then the Gibb River provides an uncomfortable precedent, and this is why alarm bells are being

sounded by some. Understandably, concern follows that the re-making of rock images may be taken up as a political and symbolic gesture, out of a generalized Aboriginal pride in the achievements of their forebears and applied to who knows what? – perhaps to Sydney Basin rock-engravings a thousand or more years old, perhaps to very ancient archaeological manifestations elsewhere. Once again, it is feared that archaeological concerns will not carry weight in demonstrations of cultural exclusivity.

Some points may be made that soothe these fears. In the Kimberley, only the Wandjina figures are currently the focus of attention; no figures in the earlier regional style, ‘Bradshaw’, have been involved. The interest in repainting is a regional one; there has, for example, been no revival of painting in Kakadu where figures seem last to have been painted, at Nourlangie (Jones 1985), in 1972. Recent repainting has indeed taken place elsewhere in the Northern Territory, as Chaloupka showed and deplored at the Darwin Congress, but this has been to favour White photographers and film-makers anxious for ‘good’ shots rather than at Aboriginal instigation. And re-touch has been considered for a decade as a reasonable, though controversial, element within a strategy for conserving the images where, as in Kakadu, they are fading at an alarming rate. Nevertheless, it remains the case that the maintenance of some tradition of repainting in north-west Australia may become precedent for the making of a new habit of repainting elsewhere in the country, and some archaeologists see real danger arising that way.

The thrust of recent Australian politics, and policies, has been towards Aboriginal control of Aboriginal cultural heritage. This follows the larger pattern of world affairs, in which distinct ethnic groups are increasingly recognized as having special or exclusive rights of proprietorship over their cultural heritage. This especially produces anomalies when circumstances have badly battered, divided or dispersed an indigenous group, so that membership comes to be defined, in part or in whole, less by descent than by self-declaration of membership of the group. In Australia, as elsewhere, the definition of an ‘Aboriginal’ ethnic group itself follows a European model; it was only with the arrival of Europeans into the continent, that a structured opposition between native and newcomer came into being. A pan-Aboriginal identity, rather than tribal or language affiliations, is itself a necessary response to the European view of native Australians. With the making of ethnic identities on the model of European nation-states has come, of course, the concomitants of defined nationality, among them the expectation of absolute rights of ownership by members of that defined group.

If absolute ownership is to be the guiding principal, then outsiders’ concern has no standing, for who are the learned professors to interfere in things that belong solely to others? Taken further, Australia could reach that calamitous situation that prevails in, for example, much of the USA where rights of landownership carry overwhelming weight; that is why many an American landowner, by reason of his deed of title, may casually bulldoze a site or quarry it for commercial pot-hunting without regard for other interests.

Aboriginal attitudes to land, as set out above, have none of that Western and exploitative view, of land as just another commodity to be manipulated for cash gain. David Mowaljarlai’s concern is above all to do with the land, and the things of the land, as being in custodianship rather than ownership. It is more concerned with responsibilities to land rather than rights to land. In the Kimberley, however, differing views have been taken into consideration; for example, controversial newly-painted figures, agreed to be inappropriate, have been removed.

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Reference has already been made to Gamble’s article (Gamble 1986), entitled “The artificial wilderness”, which indicates how much the ‘natural’ landscape of the Australian outback is itself an artificial creation that results from many centuries of human activity. There is no ‘natural and original’ state to which the landscape should properly be returned. The same is true of the people who inhabit that landscape; they inhabit our time, not some timeless and hypothetical ‘ethnographic present’. Australian Aborigines wear

jeans and drive Toyota Landcruisers like everyone else. There may well be a discrepancy between the social position of the older people, recorded by ethnographers as having repainted in the 1920s and 1930s, and that of the young people now repainting and paid under a community-employment scheme. The repainting project is itself part of a plan to maintain and revive traditional values before they are lost, but those traditional values are being maintained and re-made in a world that is greatly changing. The traditional owners of the Kimberley can no more be asked to act as if they lived in the 1930s than archaeologists can be expected to pretend their subject is as it was in the 1930s. If art-as-process is to continue, in the perpetuation of a tradition of painting on Australian rock that has continued over many millennia, then it will necessarily be as an act that takes place in the world as it is today.

Acknowledgements

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NOTES

The editor of *Antiquity* introduced the paper with this statement:

“Sandra Bowdler reported in the last issue of *Antiquity* (62: 517-23) on the controversy surrounding the recent repainting of Wandjina figures on the rocks of the western Kimberley, northwest Australia. Here is an Aboriginal Australian’s view of the repainting project and its significance, along with an explication and further discussion of implications.”

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Also about re-marking of imagery in the Kimberley:

Papers in *Retouch: Maintenance and conservation of aboriginal rock imagery*, edited by Graeme K. Ward (1988)

Blundell, Valda and Donny Woolagoodja 2005 *Keeping the Wanjinias Fresh: Sam Woolagoodja and the enduring power of Lalai*. Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle (WA).

O’Connor, Sue, Anthony Barham and Donny Woolagoodja 2008 Painting and repainting in the west Kimberley. *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 2008/1: 22-38.

The Malnic and Mowaljarlai work cited above as being ‘in preparation’ was published as:

Mowaljarlai, David and Jutta Malnic 1993 *Yorro yorro: Everything standing up alive: spirit of the Kimberley*. Magabala Books, Broome (WA).

Mowaljarlai died in 1997:

Ward, Graeme K (compiler and editor) 1997 D Mowaljarlai, OAM 1925-1997. *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1997/2:78-84.

Pat Vinnicombe in 2003:

Attenbrow, Valerie, Nicola Stern, and Peter Veth 2003 Patricia Vinnicombe 1932-2003. *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 2003/2:103-104,

GKW November 2014