

A look into the soul of a culture

NICOLAS ROTHWELL [The Australian](#) September 11, 2015



Wanjina rock art of the northwest Kimberley. *Source:* Supplied

They stare out, their deep eyes pools of darkness set in concentric facial masks of dazzling white, their blood-red haloes radiating plumes that seem like the sun's refracted rays or lightning's fire. What secrets do the Wanjina rock paintings of the far north Kimberley hold, and what can we know, and say, of them?

They are the most obsessively researched and intensively described rock art corpus in all remote Australia, the most potent to outside eyes and the most elusive. The Wanjina tradition is relatively recent, yet its ochre-painted images, in their harsh, hot tropical environment, have the lovely, fascinating, fading patina of age.

Westerners have puzzled over them for more than 170 years: are they ancestral figures, ghost-spirits, clouds, creator beings, gods, or all, somehow, of the above?

Early explorer George Grey, who first encountered Wanjina art in a cave gallery along the Glenelg River in March 1838, was instantly struck by the poised, hieratic quality of the faces he saw staring back at him: brightly coloured, in red, yellow and white, "and the eyes were the only figures represented on the face".

A procession of researchers has followed in Grey's footsteps down the ensuing decades: the theories, interpretations and study projects have multiplied. Wanjina images have entered the contemporary indigenous culture market, and are much painted by artists based at Mowanjum

and Kalumburu. A large Wanjina emblem even featured in the opening ceremony for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games.

There has long been an urgent need for a new and comprehensive summary account of this rock art tradition, its significance in the indigenous realm of the Kimberley and the ways in which its images have travelled out across time into the wider world.

At last such a work of synthesis has been prepared — an appreciation of the art of the Wanjina and its vast associated fretwork of song cycles and narratives. Appropriately enough, this exhaustive study is itself a cryptic and intriguing production.

It is the result of more than 40 years of research by anthropologist Kim Akerman, but it also collects the testimony of a wide range of traditional informants.

Much like Akerman's slender work on Kimberley pearlshell, which appeared as a Northern Territory Museum of Arts and Sciences monograph in 1993 and remains both definitive and unfindably rare, his Wanjina work was released under the radar. Its first incarnation was as a research essay, put out online this year by the Kimberley Foundation in advance of a public lecture to be given this month at the University of Western Australia.

The title, *Notes on Some Iconic Ancestral Beings of the North Kimberley*, is low-key but Akerman succeeds in conveying the intricacy of the Wanjina tradition and the raw force of the art on the rocks, its feel of potency, its projected "quality of massiveness that almost borders on the Cyclopean".

The details and elaborations contained in the landscape-crossing Wanjina narrative, the traditional role of the painted images in weather control and rain-making, the special connection between the wide-eyed rock art figures and the northern long-necked tortoise, in whose skeleton are little bones that resemble the form of the first man, made by creator beings at Munja on Walcott Inlet: all these points and others are teased out and explained.

"I hope I have done something to transmit the complexity of one aspect of the indigenous cosmology of the north and central Kimberley," Akerman says.

And here we come close to the heart of his project.

All we know of rock art in the remote reaches of the north leads us to conclude that the painted images and emblems we can still see on the walls of caves and overhangs were merely one element in a linked set of rituals and observances: songs, stories, visual depictions, stone alignments and sculpted forms were all joined together to express the world view of the three peoples of the Wanjina region, the Worrorra, Ngarinyin and Wunambal.

Western scholars came to this landscape late, after the first tide of pastoral pioneers and missionaries had begun to put their imprint on the coastline and the plateau country between Wyndham and Broome.

It was soon clear from the first contacts between outsiders and Aboriginal informants that the Wanjina figures were viewed as individuals, they had names, and associations with place. Men could be named after them.

The Wanjinias were believed to be the original artists who had left their portrait images on the rocks. Each site had its own narrative. Akerman highlights one of the best-known, linked to the Wanalirri rock shelter east of Gibb River station. It is the story of an apocalyptic flood in far-off times.

A battle broke out between Wanjinias and men after a group of children had mocked and humiliated a barking owl. The Wanjinias took revenge and drowned all but two of the children in an overwhelming flood torrent.

Missionary James Love recorded two distinct versions and interpretations of the story, which was also set down by German anthropologist Helmut Petri. It was the focus of the famous Wanalirri Palga, or ceremonial dance cycle, prepared in the late 1960s by Worrorra composer Wattie Nyerdu. Many features of the Wanjina ritual became plain as a result of these mid-century researches; many became more puzzling. Why were the Wanjina figures shown with no mouths? What were the dark objects emplaced on their chests?

The first serious attempt to take the measure of the Wanjinias as both artistic objects and religious symbols was made by the German Frobenius expedition, which went into the field just before World War II, but published its results only well after the war's cataclysmic end.

"Their work gave much greater voice to the complexity and durability of Aboriginal life and thought," Akerman says. "They present the lore mythology as relatively coherent and mature narratives, embodied totally within the landscape and the society."

Gradually, the sheer scale of the Wanjina belief system became evident, and more thorough descriptions were drawn up, based on further fieldwork.

In the early 70s, archeologist Ian Crawford provided a sketch of the mythology that is still viewed as a sure guide to its key characteristics. The Wanjinias control fertility through their dominion of the flow of life spirits from the sky to earth, they control the growth of plants, they have the power of life and death, they bring good fortune and must be constantly placated, they are familiars of mankind and can be visited in dreams.

This picture records the fundamentals of a religion and a set of ceremonial practices at a hinge point in time. Crawford, Akerman and their colleagues in the anthropological vanguard were at work even as the last stage of the colonial encounter was unfolding, and old beliefs increasingly were being challenged by the impact of modern life.

At much the same period, an American scholar named John McCaffrey was engaged in the north Kimberley. He was specially interested in the way artists at Derby and nearby Mowanjum made their art objects for commercial sale.

His interview recordings, which have come to light only recently, provide an unusual snapshot of the art of the Wanjinias as it was being made.

Red ochre, lightning, the noise of thunder constantly pealing, torrential rain: it is a primal scene that McCaffrey's Wanjina artists seek to show.

By the last years of the century just gone by, professional researchers and art collectors were thick in the field in dry season all through Wanjina country, alongside a growing number of

private enthusiasts, or “avocationalists”. Chief among these was the manic prince of north Kimberley rock art studies, Grahame Walsh, whose manuscript account of the Wanjina religion has yet to see the light of day.

Akerman’s own provisional version of just a single connected Wanjina narrative, linking stories and beings from coast and inland, contains 16 episodes and gives a faint glimpse of what a complete portrait of this tradition might be.

Inevitably, a note of nostalgia hangs over his presentation, but it is a tempered, nuanced note: “One cannot help but wonder,” he writes, “how the cosmology of the Wanjina was celebrated when all estates that fell within their sphere of influence had their full complement of clan members. Perhaps there were large group gatherings that celebrated the Wanjina sagas not as isolated incidents associated with specific sites, but collectively, in the same manner that people of the arid regions celebrated through song and dance the great Dreaming tracks that crisscross the deserts of Australia.”

Akerman is convinced great epics such as the Wanalirri story are integral to the understanding of the old mythscape of the north Kimberley — and this leads him to outline, in clear-eyed fashion, an urgent project, of national import: “It is clear that there is still much to know about Wanjinas and Wanjina-style art, although it is apparent that much knowledge has been lost, and the process of cultural loss began soon after contact. It is imperative that an effort be made to consolidate whatever knowledge still exists.”

Much of that remaining knowledge, paradoxically enough, is preserved in the journals of early amateur site recorders, missionaries and pioneer ethnographers. But the way to a comprehensive program of cultural maintenance is still to be crafted. Akerman is blunt about the challenge, and what is at stake.

“Today virtually all the older informants familiar with the sites and their associated mythology have died — it would be a tragedy if their legacy were likewise to lapse into obscurity.

“It is hoped that their descendants will continue to maintain the traditions they have inherited and share them with the same generosity as their ancestors, contributing to a richer and wider appreciation of the long history of this country.”