



Researching, preserving and promoting Kimberley rock art.

# ***Unravelling the Wanjinas – A Tentative Start.***

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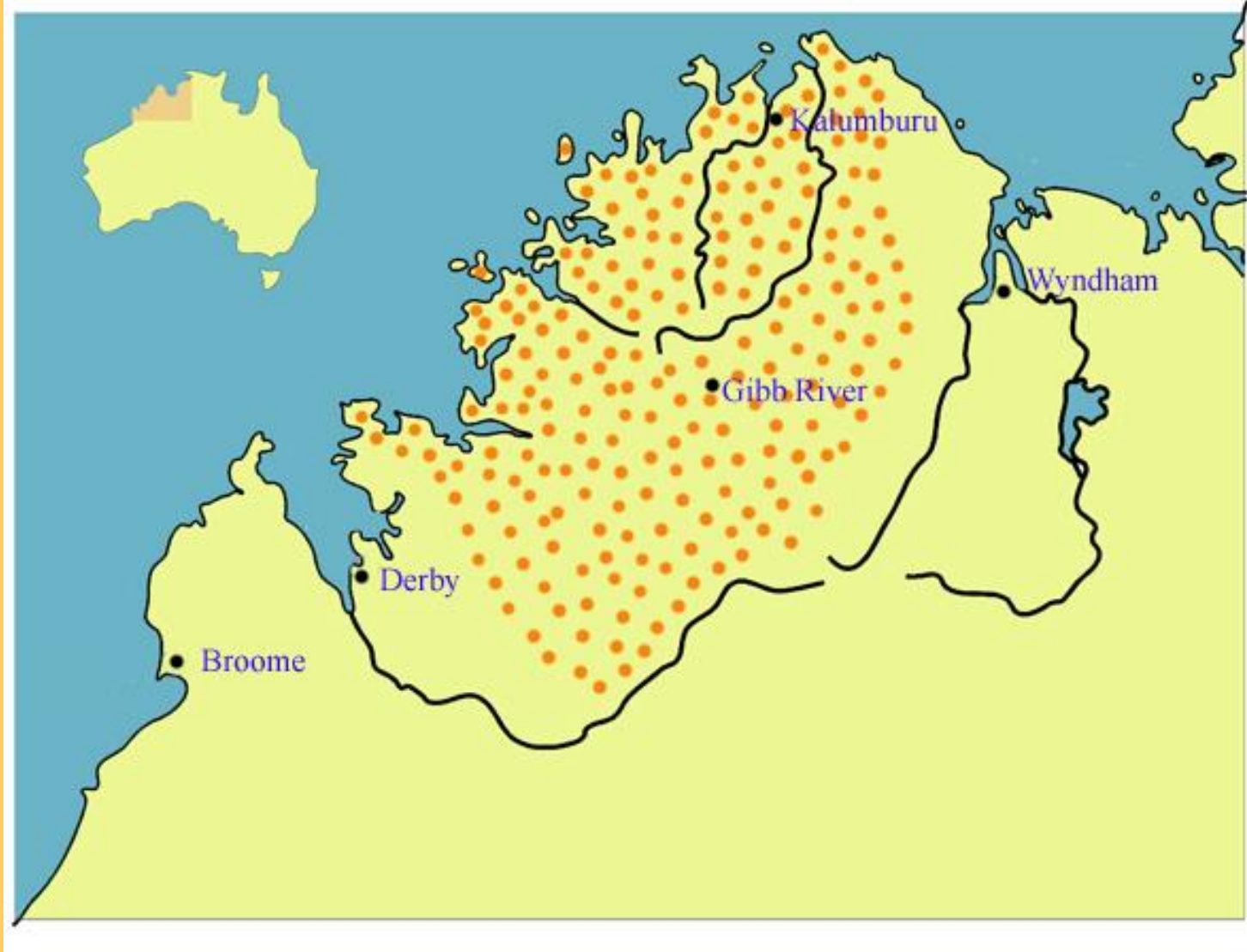
**From the moment Wanjina figures were first recorded by Explorer George Grey in 1838, they have captured the imagination of both academics and the general public.**





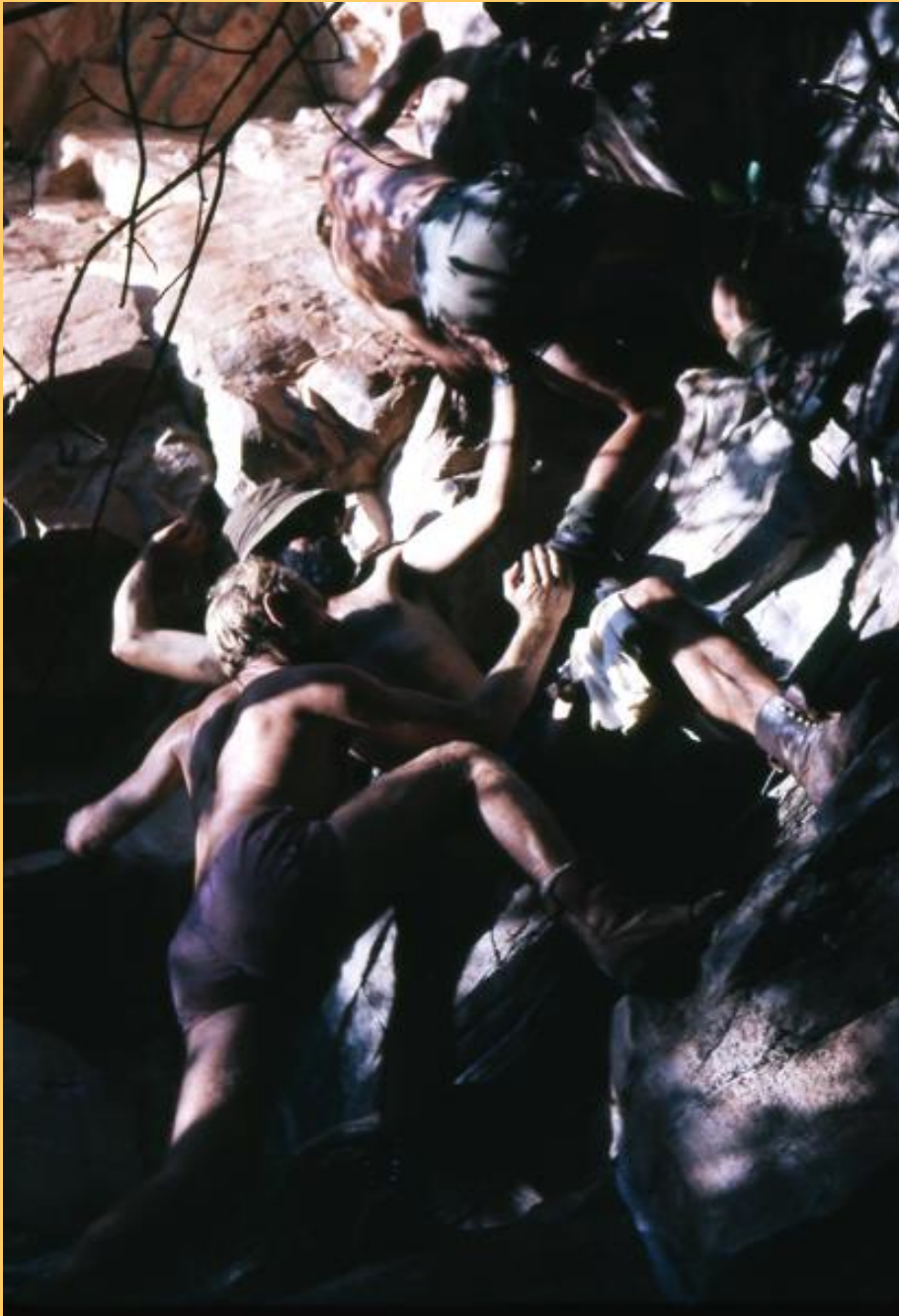


**The Kimberley became intrinsically associated in the minds of many people with the mysterious Wanjina figures. The discoveries of the Brockman Expedition fuelled further speculation as to the origins of this fantastic artwork**



**Although the Kimberley is a vast stretch of country the cult of the Wanjina and associated art is restricted to the north and central areas of the region.**





**Sometimes  
looking for  
Wanjinas is not  
easy.**



**Located just over 200kms from Derby, these Wanjina paintings are very small, and placed immediately above a burial bundle.**

**A wasp nest almost obliterates one face on the panel at lower right.**





**Originally photographed in 1911 by Yngve Laurell, the child Wanjina Wananami – Wandada, at Mount Barnett Station, was repainted in the 1980s.**





**Wanjinas are intimately associated with the Wet season, with rain, storms, and all other forms of water. Wanjinas above a permanent pool of water at Amantara – Maralla, Mount Elizabeth Station.**





**One of the southernmost  
Wanjina paintings.**

**Pinjawuri (or Pinjawara) a  
Wanjina who transformed into  
a crocodile.**

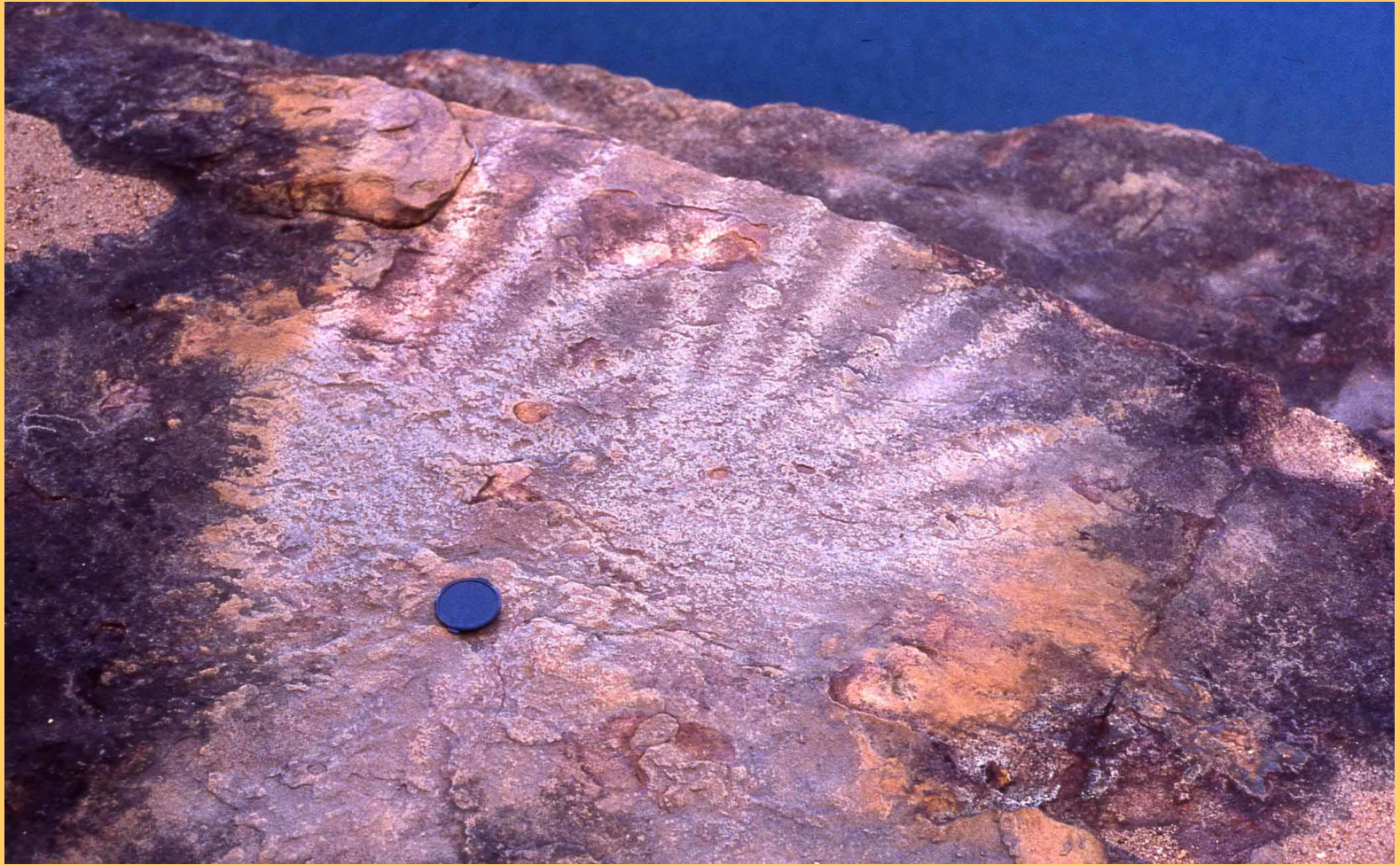
**Stumpy' s Bore, Oscar Ranges.**





**Wanjina faces are occasionally found on small portable slabs of stone.**





**Many engravings in this art zone, such as these, the hands of the Wanjina Wanumpara, are associated with Wanjina mythology.**

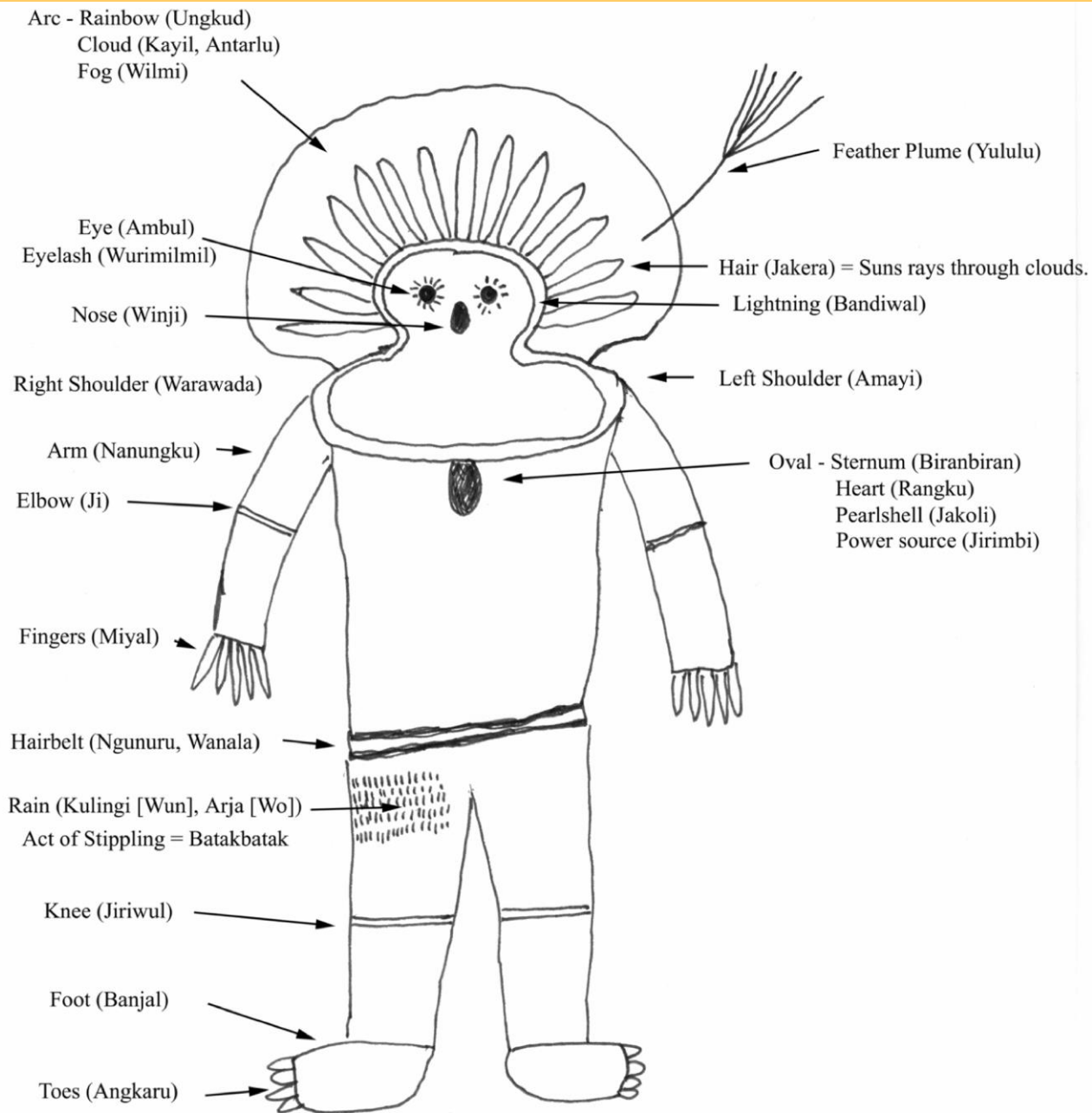
**Yatawin, Mount Barnett Station.**





**Left. A Sea Wanjina or *Kayara* in the process of being re-painted. Vansittart Bay.**

**Above. *Kayara*. Prince Frederick Harbour.**



**Some of the  
features found  
on Wanjinas.**



**Examining seemingly disparate myths suggests  
that a single great epic, the Wanalirri Saga,  
underpins much of the cosmology of the  
region.**

The Wanalirri Saga relates the conflict that arose between a group of humans, and the Wanjina *Wojin*.

The Barking Owl *Tumbi*, the son of the *Wojin*, had been tormented by children and demanded that the humans be punished for their actions. *Wojin* tried to placate *Tumbi* by offering him the services of the Red-tail Cockatoo Woman.

This did not suit *Tumbi* who insisted that the humans be wiped out. *Wojin* then called on Wanjinas across the land to join the fight.

**Initially the Wanjinās could not find the humans and various birds and animals were sent out to locate them. The birds however either felt sorry for the humans, or were disinclined to fight, and failed to report their whereabouts.**

**The humans were betrayed by the lizard *Makurikuri* who found them at Tunbayi and pointed them out to the Wanjinās.**

**In the ensuing battle the humans are destroyed except for two children who, grasping the tail of a wallaby are pulled to safety.**









**Detailed painting of the fight  
at Tunbai and the subsequent  
escape of the two children.**





**After the fight the Wanjinas disperse returning home. Wojin goes back to his shelter at Wanalirri and leaves himself, surrounded by his family and other Wanjina, as a painting on the wall.**



**Examining seemingly disparate myths has revealed that a single great epic underpins much of the cosmology of the region.**

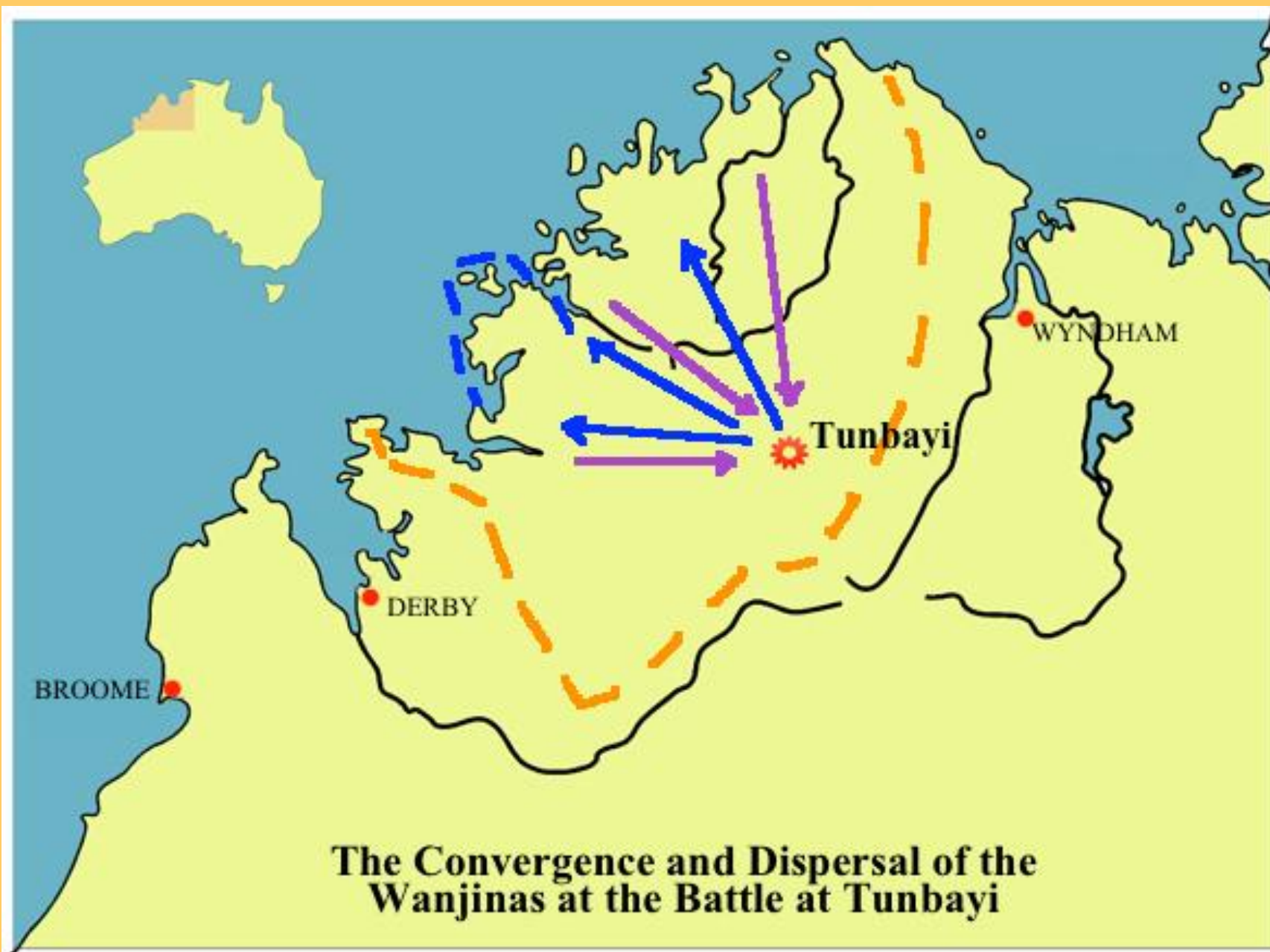
***Wojin*, a senior Wanjina, rests in his cave at Wanalirri. Beneath him sits one of the custodians of Wanjina lore for the area.**







**Matutpata and other Wanjinas associated with the marine environment at Ngumbri Cave, Raft Point. The central figure is a Lulinja, a mischievous sprite.**





1

Children torment  
*Tumbi* the Barking  
Owl.

2

*Tumbi* calls on his father  
*Wojin* for vengeance.

3

Wanjinas assemble.  
Introduction of  
subincision.

4

Dragon Lizard locates  
humans. Wanjinas destroy  
all but two at *Tunbayi*.  
*Wojin* sends others to find  
them.

5

*Wojin* and *Namarali* blamed for  
starting the conflict. *Wojin* goes to his  
shelter, *Namarali* goes to the coast.

Groper Woman, *Jimbirija* and Baler  
Shell Woman *Nyabali*, flee from  
Ngarinyin Wanjinas and return to the  
coast.

6

*Namarali* taken in by Coastal  
Wanjinas.

Coastal and Inland Wanjinas  
pursue the two women.

*Matutpata* arrives at *Wijingari*.  
Met by Native Cat. *M* fights with  
Wanjinas over *Jimbirija*. Is  
speared and eventually buried  
at *Langgi*.

Native Cat institutes west  
Kimberley mourning procedures

7

*Jimbirija* goes to Doubtful  
Bay - Steep Island, then  
returns north to Prince  
Regent.

8

*Jimbirija* parts from *Nyabali* and goes  
to *Taralu* where she is killed. In some  
versions *Namarali* kills her, in others a  
Wanjina called *Djabedumenja* is  
responsible.

9

Wanjina tells birds to make fire.  
*Mariri* the Red-winged Parrot.  
Fire is stolen by Freshwater  
Crocodile but saved by Parrot.

Crocodile receives cicatrices

10

*Jimbirija* is cooked and  
consumed.

This account is a mere sketch of the complexities of this myth.

Other parties of Wanjinas, returning from *Tunbayi* to their own bases, experience adventures of various kinds.

In many cases there are gaps in the oral traditions of the region as clans diminished or lost senior members early in the contact period of Kimberley history.

Helmut Petri recorded that the mythology associated with some of the shelters visited during the Frobenius Expedition of 1938, had been lost as associated clans became extinct.

At this period also the Wanjina Cult was severely impacted upon by 'Travelling Ceremonies' introduced from the south and east and possibly also by the influence of Christianity.



**In many ways by the intermeshing of so many hitherto disparate legends the Wanalirri saga reflects the complexities of ancient Greek mythology that are found incorporated in Homer's Iliad – the story of the Fall of Troy.**

**Robert Graves's discussion of the Greek Myths reveals that many of the Greek heroes and deities, usually treated in isolation, are in fact involved or contribute to the Iliad, one of the greatest of Western Sagas.**

**While apparently uniting many disparate aspects of Kimberley Wanjina mythology into a coherent whole, the Wanalirri saga is by no means the only myth line that occurs within the Wanjina belt.**

**As with other landscapes in Aboriginal Australia, the north Kimberley is steeped in tradition. Many other heroic mythic Beings, in the form of plants, animals, and natural phenomena interact with each other and with Wanjina beings as they cross the land.**

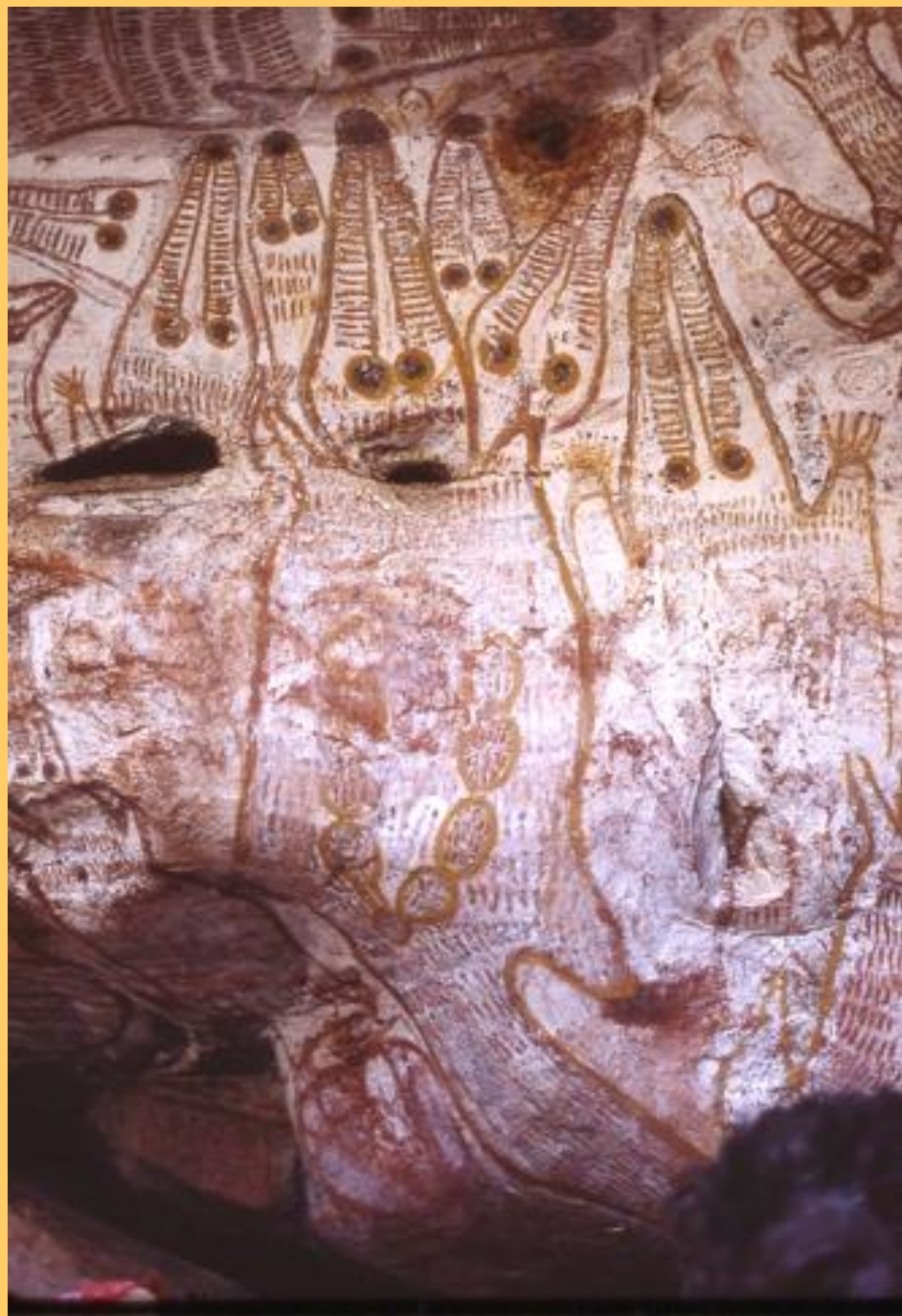




**Manawara an *Ungkud*  
with eggs and young at  
*Nyalangunta*.**

**Gibb River Station.**





**Freshwater crocodiles. One  
with eggs,**

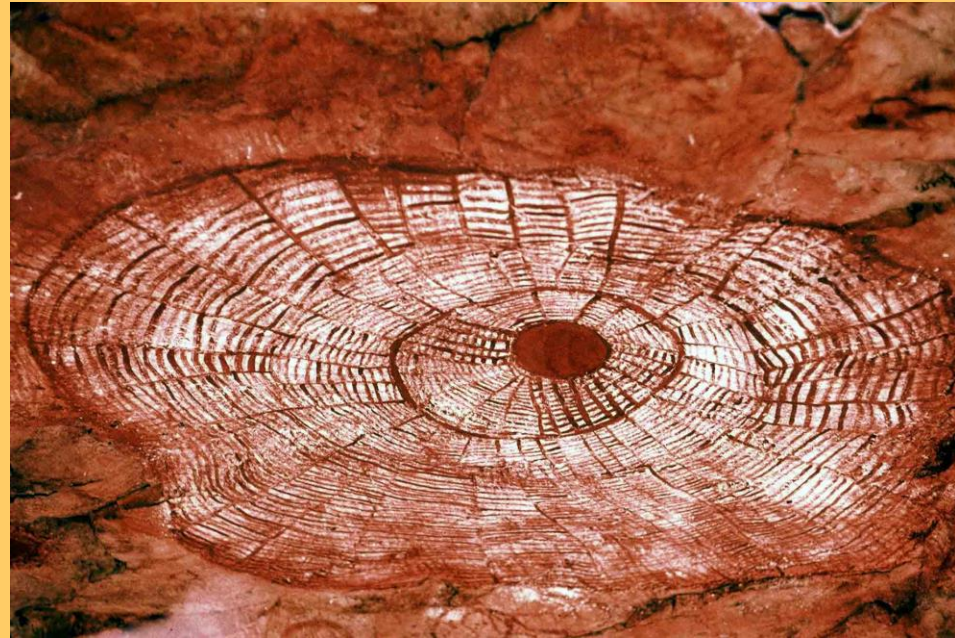
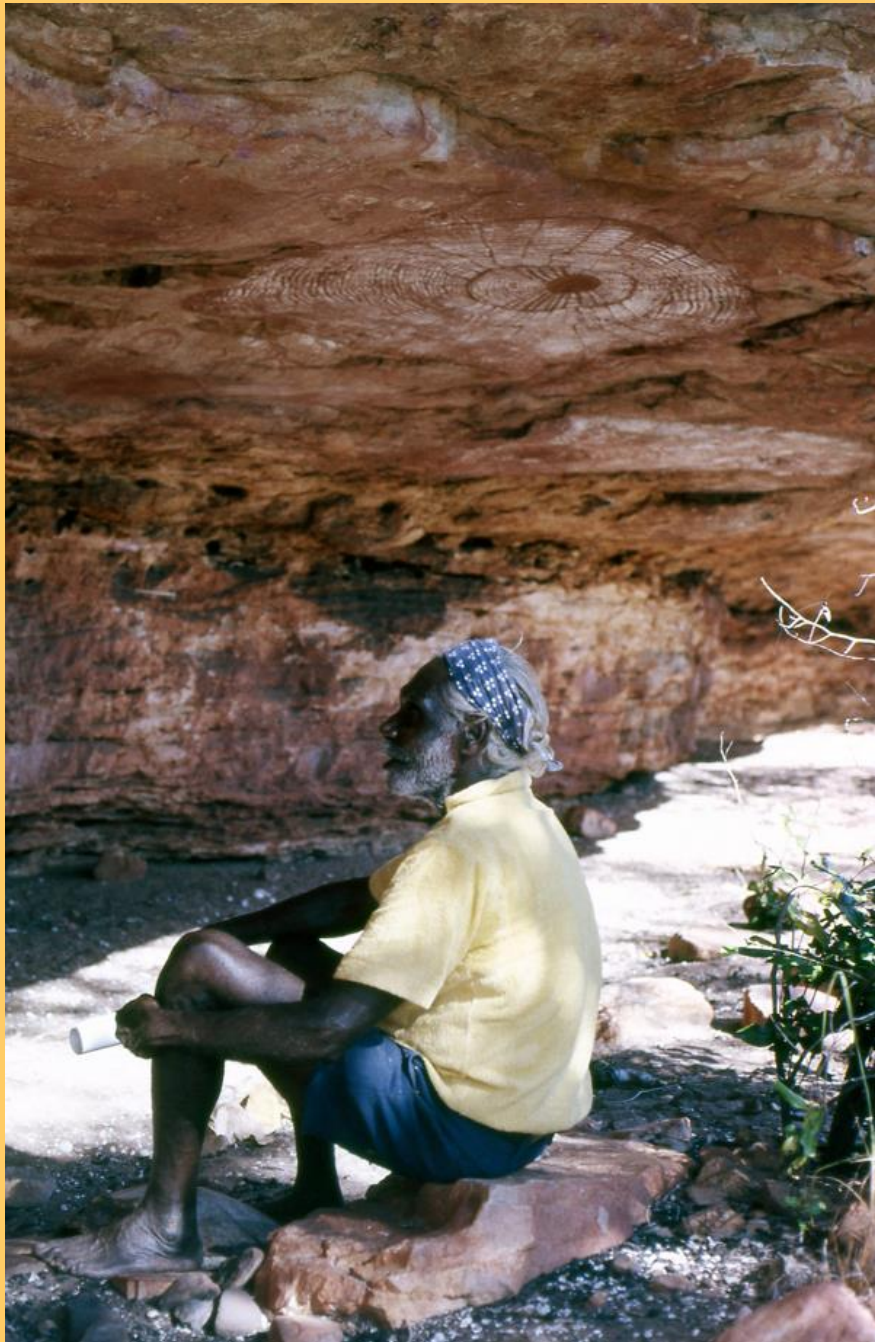
**Biyankan, Mt Barnett area.**





**Paintings of beehives at a 'Sugarbag' Dreaming site.  
Lawley River area.**





**Sam Woolagoodja sits  
beneath a painting of a  
Wanjina / whirlpool / cyclone.  
Wijingarri.**





## Enigmatic paintings of Long Yams

**Above: Wattie Karrawarra.  
Right: Micky Bungkuni.**











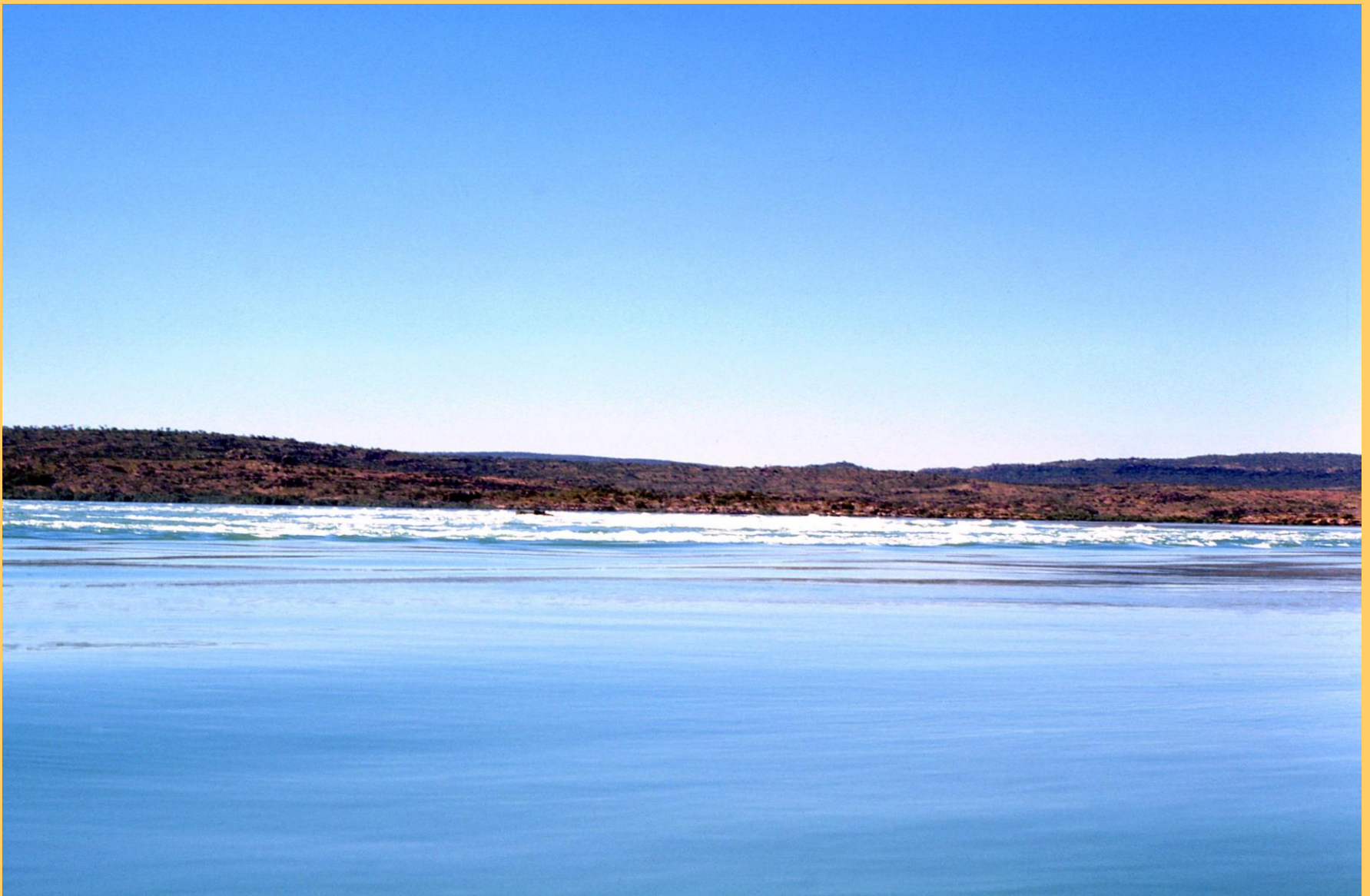
**Outcrops of rugged rocks exposed at low tide at Wijingari – Freshwater Cove - represent fighting Wanjinias.**

**A person can make rain by rubbing these rocks– but if they are struck hard torrential rain will ensue.**



**The beautiful tiers that constitute King's Cascades (*Marmbulbada*) are the result of the *Jimbirija* the Groper Woman coming to an abrupt halt when stopped in her rush home by *Marmbulbada* the Great Bowerbird Man.**





**Wanjinas are present also in the great tidal movements of the area – a whirlpool at Doubtful Bay – Wanjina and the great *Ungkud* serpent in one.**



**The storm clouds that herald the wet season are visible natural manifestations of the Wanjinās.**





**Various Gwion/Bradshaw Figures. North Kimberley**





**Images of  
extinct fauna are  
also found in the  
art of the  
Wanjina Belt.**







**Ephemeral designs made by  
scraping away ash left by burning  
the grass.**

**The top figure is about 9 metres  
long.**







**While other, earlier, art forms will always leave us querying their role in past lives, we are indeed lucky that so much Wanjina lore remains with us today.**





**THE END.**

## Acknowledgments

Since the mid-1960s when I was first introduced to Wanjina stories by men and women of Mowanjum and Derby, I have been privileged to work with other senior custodians across the ‘Wanjina Belt’, in the field and within their communities.

Too numerous to mention them all individually, I must however acknowledge the impact on my life by Albert and Pudja Barunga, Sam Woolagoodja, May Langgi, Gertie Yabu, Collier Bangmoro and Jean Wonganyet, Violet Dullen and George Jomeri, Jack Wherra, senior members of the extensive Karadada family, Alec Minjilmanganu and Hector Dangal.





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