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Art and Rock-art of the Kimberley, Northwest Australia: Narratives, Interpretations and Imaginations*

Abstract:
This chapter introduces some issues related to the different interpretations and narratives that have been put forward in relation to the Indigenous rock-art of the Kimberley, Northwest Australia. At the centre of inquiry is an examination of the construction of European narratives around these images in their respective historical context. The earliest interpretations were put forward by British explorers and were constructed within the racist and evolutionistic frameworks of the 19th century. These narratives were intimately bound to the contemporary colonialist experience. However, it is also shown that certain elements of these interpretations have lasting effects that resonate until today. Interpretations about the art and the rock-art of the Kimberley find their place today in disputes over the control over land and resources between Aboriginal and other interest groups in post-colonial Australia.

Keywords: Australia; Kimberley; rock-art; colonialism; post-colonialism

Kunst und Felskunst im Kimberley, Nordwest-Australien: Erzählungen, Deutungen und Vorstellungen

Zusammenfassung:

Schlüsselwörter: Australien; Kimberley; Felskunst; Kolonialismus; Post-Kolonialismus

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1. Introduction

Narratives in archaeology very often are concerned with the question of origins. Indeed, the quest for the origin of a particular social, cultural or even biological feature can be seen to be at the very heart of the archaeological endeavour. As Gamble and Gittins (2004) have recently pointed out, the search for origins in archaeology is one of the most powerful means to construct authority and generate public interest and, ultimately, research funding. In the case of Palaeolithic archaeology and the archaeology of hunter-gatherers, this quest for origins is often bound to specific ideas about essentialist characteristics of humanity, which ultimately are developed from the values and imaginations of Western society and projected onto the deep past. The construction of these narratives is intimately bound to an essentialist understanding of humanity, in which history becomes the unfolding of specific traits over time until they reach their full potential in Western modernity (Ingold 2002; 2004). The notion of ‘origins’ and the importance that is placed on this concept to create authority over certain material culture items from a Western perspective also are relevant in the contexts explored here.

Here, the term ‘narrative’ will not be used in a very restricted fashion, but as a means to explore the different views and perspectives that have been constructed around the Indigenous imagery found on rock and other surfaces in the Kimberley, Northwest Australia. Rock-art itself certainly forms one of the cultural material expressions in the world that has generated a lot of interest in the wider public sphere and has sparked the imagination of Western audiences. Certainly, a complicated history is involved here connected to the concept of ‘art’ itself and its complex relationship with the idea of ‘primitivism’ (Price 1989; Miller 1991). In the formative period of the study of Palaeolithic archaeology this constellation, for example, lead to the rejection of the famous paintings of Altamira, discovered in 1879. They were regarded as too sophisticated and beautiful to be of Palaeolithic age. The academic community did not have any doubts at that time that naturalistic figurative imagery of Palaeolithic age existed, because decorated Magdalenian artefacts were known at this stage for more than twenty years. But paintings seemed to be a different matter and it took a further twenty years before European Palaeolithic cave paintings were accepted as genuine by the scientific community (e.g. Bahn/Vertut 1988; Bahn 2007). These events do show that indeed the acceptance of Palaeolithic art forms did follow the Western hierarchy of art appreciation since the Renaissance, in which realistic paintings on canvas were seen as the highest form of artistic expression. Accordingly, the scientific community had the most difficulties accommodating these into unilinear schemes of human cultural and cognitive evolution. As will be seen below, these unstable relationships are of particular importance in the context of the interpretation by Western observers of so-called rock-art, which has been produced by non-Western people with different orientations towards imagery, material culture items and the environment as a whole.

However, it also needs to be stressed that the interpretation of rock-art has always also been guided and misguided by the difficulties of dating the imagery (Whitley 2001). In the case of European 19th century Palaeolithic archaeology, for example, it was relatively straightforward to accept the Palaeolithic date for decorated objects because
they had been found in stratigraphical association with Palaeolithic tools and extinct animals. But it nevertheless remains an important observation that despite clear stylistic similarities between mobiliary and parietal art, the acceptance of the latter was significantly delayed. In the case of the imagery that will be discussed in this chapter, the relative isolation of the imagery from living contexts and other artefacts of Australian Aborigines, certainly has allowed a range of interpretations that show close links to the cultural-evolutionary as well as racist ideas put forward in the 19th and early 20th century.

This chapter aims at providing a very brief overview of the narratives that have been constructed around images on rock surfaces in the Kimberley, Northwest Australia. At the centre of this discussion here will be the ways in which European observers have related to Kimberley rock-art1 and the narratives that have been constructed in this context. These narratives have to be seen in the contexts of the changing socio-political conditions in colonial and post-colonial Australia of the last 150 years and as reflections of White European ideas about the status of Australian Aborigines and their relative place in evolutionary schemes of cultural developments. As such they are closely related to the respective Zeitgeist. While the foundations of European perceptions of Kimberley rock-art were laid in the 19th century, significant elements of these interpretations continue to have an influence today. They do form one strand in the complex tapestry of narratives that are produced in present-day post-colonial Australia and its shifting conflicts about land, resources and the past. Accordingly, statements about rock-art have been made and are continued to be made in a range of different arenas such as academic journals, public media, popular books or government reports. This chapter can only provide a very broad introduction into these processes, which have been systematically studied very little. At this stage, it also needs to be stressed that the rock-images of the Kimberley have always formed an integral part of Indigenous Australian relationships between people and their environment. Indeed, the images in the Kimberley form one of the most remarkable records of these complex relationships, which, in all its diversity, are not well known to the wider Australian public. Indigenous narratives and images have always formed interrelated elements, long before they were represented and misrepresented in the journals of European explorers and later writings. In this respect, the importance of the Kimberley lies in the fact that despite the significant disruptions of the links between Aboriginal people, art and country since the European colonization of this region in the late 19th century, the art still very much forms a part of a living culture. As will be argued below, it is therefore especially important to understand the problematic orientation within a certain strand of Western narratives to ignore the rich mythology associated with the imagery – and to interpret it in relation to different and sometimes absurd cultural contexts.

1 It is here acknowledged that the term ›art‹ is insufficient to characterize the thousands of images and marks on rock that were created by Aboriginal Australians over the last tens of thousands of years. However, here the term will not be dropped, but will be used interchangeably with ›images‹ or ›drawings‹. The so-called ›rock-art‹ of the Kimberley forms an inseparable part of the traditional world-view of the local Aboriginal groups. Even though it has been transformed in the recent past to also play a role in the global art trade – as paintings on canvases – its roots are firmly located in the relationships between the people, their beliefs and the land.
2. Nature and culture of the Kimberley, Northwest Australia

The Kimberley in Northwest Australia is an administrative district of the state of Western Australia. It is located in the tropical zone of the continent. To the north and west it is bordered by the Indian Ocean and the Timor Sea. To the south, the region is bordered by the desert country of the dry centre of Australia, while to the east the Ord and the Keep River systems provide a certain natural barrier on the way to the next important cultural region, Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. The climate of the Kimberley is tropical with a very pronounced change between a rainy and a dry season. The coastline is very rugged and is characterized by a large number of islands of different sizes. The inland of the Kimberley is similarly fragmented and very difficult to access. The geographical characteristics and its location have contributed significantly to its specific pre- and post-colonial history.

The Kimberley was most likely one of the earliest regions to be settled by the ancestors of today’s Australian Aborigines. Recent research demonstrates the presence of humans at the southern fringe of the Kimberley between 45,000 – 50,000 years ago (Veth et al. 2009). Evidence from further excavations points to some of the earliest use of ochre and personal ornaments as well as long-distance trade of non-utilitarian objects (O’Connor/Fankhauser 2001; Balme 2000; Balme/Morse 2006). The details of subsequent developments are still very poorly understood, but it is clear that the Kimberley is one of the culturally most complex areas of Aboriginal Australia. It is the only region in which during the Holocene a sophisticated bifacial stone technology developed, leading to the so-called beautiful Kimberley points, which were still made in the ethnographic presence (e.g. Akerman et al. 2002). Linguistically, the Kimberley belongs together with Arnhem Land to the area of Non-Pama-Nyungan languages, which effectively means that the language differentiation here is much greater than in the rest of the Australian continent (Kofod 1993). The basis of this situation is still unclear. However, it has been suggested that the overall cultural complexity in the north of Australia can be attributed to long-term contacts with outsiders. Contrary to popular perception, Aboriginal Australia was not isolated from cultural developments elsewhere. It is clear today that northern Australia was part of a global trade network over centuries before the arrival of the first European explorers in the 17th century.

Most prominent in this context was the trade that was undertaken by Indonesian traders that were operating from the port of Makassar on the island of Sulawesi (Bowler 2002). The main commodity that was taken from Australian waters was sea slug, *trepang* or *bêche-de-mer*. It was mainly traded throughout Asia, where it was valued for its supposedly aphrodisiac qualities. There is now extensive archaeological evidence available of these operations, which also involved the processing of *trepang* in beach camps on the mainland. Macassan visits also have their place in Aboriginal oral histories of the Kimberley and boats as well as representations of foreign sailors feature in the rock-art of the region, which proves to be one of the most complex and fascinating records of image-making in the world (O’Connor/Arrow 2008).
3. Aboriginal art and rock-art of the Kimberley: A brief overview

The Kimberley is characterized by an extraordinary rich record of Aboriginal art forms that stretches back tens of thousands of years. In the Kimberley currently the oldest known traces of artistic material expressions on the Australian continent are found. At Carpenter’s Gap a slab with red ochre pigment has been found in Pleistocene occupation levels and dated to ca. 41,000 BP. Furthermore, a very early example of personal ornamentation was also found in the Kimberley, which also points to the long-distance transport of these non-utilitarian objects during the Pleistocene (Balme 2000). In terms of figurative rock-art, the Kimberley contains one of the most complex records anywhere in the world. In this text, I want to concentrate basically on two major complexes, the Wanjina-Wunggurr tradition and the Gwion Gwion tradition, but it needs to be acknowledged that the overall sequence is much more rich and complex than this dualism suggests (e.g. Morwood 2002; Layton 1992 for more detailed overviews).

Art in the tradition of the Wanjina-Wunggurr is the dominant expression of Indigenous figurative art in the region. It is restricted to the western and northern regions of the Kimberley and »specific to the Worrorra, Ngarinyin and Woonambal peoples who trace their own descent from Wanjina spirit ancestors« (Ryan/Akerman 1993, 10). Most recently, a simple Wanjina made from beeswax on a rock surface has been dated to 3780 ± 60 BP (AMS Ref: OZC434; Morwood et al. 2010). As Wanjinas are still being painted and re-painted today it seems fair to say that this indeed forms one of the oldest continuous art traditions in the world. This does not, however, mean that the art as well as the concepts and ideas associated with it remained unchanged over this time period. However, these past processes are so far virtually unknown. In contrast, much is ethnographically known about the Indigenous meanings and narratives associated with these images.2

Wanjina is a general term that refers to the spirit ancestors of the above-mentioned Kimberley people and their representations in anthropomorphic images (Figure 1). Individual Wanjinas can be identified and they have names and narratives associated with them. These narratives refer to the actions of the Wanjinas during Lalai (Dreaming) where the country was formed. It is said that during Lalai the Wanjinas ›finished‹ or were ›lying down‹ at certain places, and became paintings. In this way a complex social landscape was formed that intimately connects people and country, because each Wanjina is the ancestor of a particular local patrilineal descent group, which is subsequently ›responsible for the ritual maintenance of galleries in their dambun (clan estate)« (Ryan/Akerman 1993, 11). The images are consequently not seen as representations of ancestral beings, but rather are perceived as the ancestors themselves, who continue to be alive and active. This understanding is encapsulated in this poem by Sam Woolagoodja (quoted in Ryan/Akerman 1993, 12):

Some *Wandjina* went under the land,
they came to stay in the caves
and there we can see them.
Grown men listen to their *Wandjina*.

Long ago,
at another time,
these *Wandjina* changed the bad ones
into the rocks
and the springs
we always drink from.
These places hold our spirits,
these *Ungur* places of the *Wandjina*.

The term *’Ungur* or *Wunggurr* refers to the reproductive life force in nature, the eternal and ever-present *Lalai* and is mostly associated with places with water. The figurative expression of *Wunggurr* is very often the Rainbow Snake, a motive that can be found in different forms across Australia. But sometimes *Wunggurr* is also used interchangeably with *Wanjina* as the latter is in some contexts perceived as the anthropomorphic manifestation of *Wunggurr*. The dominant depictions of *Wanjinas* and *Wunggurr* are in rock-shelters often surrounded by numerous other images, mostly of animals (e.g. dingo, crocodiles, birds) but also of plants, honey bags or evil bush spirits.
It is not possible to go into the important meanings and stories associated with these depictions, but the use of the same heavy style reinforces the belief that all fertility in the country comes from *Wanjina-Wunggurr* and that they are related to each other within the time-less *Lalai*, which connects humans, animals, spirits and the country to each other. »Drawings of the *Wanjina* must be ritually restored before the wet season so that ... species will increase and the land will receive the abundance which only rain can bring« (Ryan/Akerman 1993, 13).

These intimate connections between art, environment and people were seriously disrupted with the onset of the colonial expansion into the Kimberley in the early 20th century (Jebb 2002). The displacement of people from their traditional lands eventually did lead to new artistic traditions, which centred on the painting of imagery on other materials, such as canvas or bark. *Wanjina* art has now a firm place in the international art trade (Dedman 2006; Stanton 1989; 2006). The art, however, has not lost its deep connection to the country and landscape. O'Connor et al. (2008, 22) recently suggested that »painting in the new media represents a continuation or transference of traditional practice. Stories about the travels, battles and engagements of *Wanjina* and other Dreaming events are now retold and experienced in the communities with reference to the paintings, an activity that is central to maintaining and reinvigorating connection between identity and place. The transposition of painting activity from sites within Country to the new »out-of-Country« settlements represents a social counterbalance to the social dislocation that arose from separation from traditional places and forced geographic moves out-of-Country to government and mission settlements in the twentieth century« (Figure 3).

Today, the largely commercial Indigenous art production in the Kimberley also increasingly incorporates imagery from the second major rock-art tradition in the region, *Gwion Gwion*. In the northwest and central Kimberley this figurative art form is distributed and extends in the northeast beyond the *Wanjina-Wunggurr* cultural landscape. It mostly consists of slender, elegant human representations, depicted with a fair amount of detail and paraphernalia (e.g. spears, personal ornaments, hair dress etc.) (Figure 4). These figures are mostly monochrome, although this might be a product of weathering processes. Stylistically, *Gwion Gwion* art seems to be largely unrelated to *Wanjina-Wunggurr* art. The former very often depicts anthropomorphic figures engaged in different activities, mostly dancing and hunting. The origins and the age of *Gwion Gwion* rock imagery is a topic of great contention. In 1997 radiometric dates were published from mud-wasp nests overlying human figures (which were superimposed on hand stencils) (Roberts et al. 1997), which ranged between ca. 17,500 and 16,500 BP. This, of course, means that these forms of art were painted well before the last glacial maximum and considerably pre-date the *Wanjina-Wunggurr* tradition. However, these results have so far not been replicated for other examples of *Gwion Gwion* rock-art (see also Watchman et al. 1997).

A certain degree of uncertainty as well as confusion seems to exist about the place of *Gwion Gwion* art in Kimberley Aboriginal mythology and narratives. It seems to be the case that this form of art did not have the same significance as *Wanjina-Wunggurr* art, because examples of regular retouching or repainting seem to be very rare. In addition, no accounts of these images feature in the early anthropological literature.
Figure 2: *Wanjina* and *Wunggurr* in a rock shelter near the Saint George Basin (Photo: Ian Crawford, 1963; permission granted by Mowanjum Art Centre; copyright: Western Australian Museum).

Figure 3: *Nambarli* (Artist: Donny Woolagoodja; acrylic on canvas; photo: M. Porr; permission granted by D. Woolagoodja; copyright: D. Woolagoodja).
However, Aboriginal people do indeed have stories for these images. In some contexts it is said that the imagery was made by a »gooyorn (small bird), occasionally seen fluttering along shelters and at the mouths of caves catching insects. Gooyorn is said to have pecked its beak on the rocks until it bled, then painted fine lines with the blood, using both its sharp beak tip and a feather from its tail. Other Woonambal people point to the role of the [Gwion Gwion] as helpers of the Wanjina ancestral beings, to whom they are of secondary importance« (Ryan/Akerman 1993, 14). This latter explanation was also given to me in a personal conversation with artist Regina Karadada, in relation to one of her own paintings of Gwion Gwions (Figure 5). Therefore, while it seems to be clear today that Gwion Gwion rock-paintings represent a very old artistic expression in the Kimberley that does not have the traditional dominance of the Wanjina-Wunggurr; they are indeed an integral part of the local social/physical universe or cosmogony. In the light of the available evidence of radiometric dates and superimpositions of rock-art, »the focus of living connection certainly shifted long ago to the Wanjina, but the Gwion form an ever-present and living sense of identity for contemporary peoples in much the same way that the early paintings are overlaid by, but seldom entirely obscured by, the Wanjina« (A. Redmond, quoted in Blundell/Woolagoodja 2005, 227–229).
Contacts between British settlers and Indigenous Australians were a complex affair after the establishment of Sydney in 1788 across the continent, ranging from open hostilities and massacres to mutual cooperation (Reynolds 1981; Perkins/Langton 2008). However, the contact history in the Kimberley was characterized by antagonism and violence from the very beginning. When sailing along the Kimberley coast in 1821, Philip Parker King encountered a group of Aboriginal people at Hanover Bay. After the initial exchange of artefacts on the beach the British were driven back to their boat and the ship surgeon was wounded by a spear. The following day King saw another group of Aboriginals on the beach, almost certainly members of the Worrorra, and fired upon them, wounding one of the men (Blundell/Woolagoodja 2005, 48–49). In December 1837 George Grey landed at Hanover Bay and explored the region around the Prince Regent and Glenelg Rivers. In Grey’s substantial, two-volume report on his expedition there is no indication of any friendly contact with the local Aboriginal people (Grey 1841). Within days of his first advance into the country his party was attacked on a number of occasions and the Aboriginal men only retreated when he fired over their heads. In February 1838 Grey was himself wounded by three spears in another incident, in which one Aboriginal man was shot dead. At the same time the naturalist James Lort Stokes reports that when he attempted to get fresh water from the mainland, »he found the beach thronged with savages; who shouted in defiance, brandishing their spears and whirling their arms around with wind-mill like velocity to threaten our advance« (Blundell/Woolagoodja 2005, 49).

This was the atmosphere in which the first reports on Kimberley rock-art were created. George Grey was the first European to write about Wanjina images and he also
produced some remarkable drawings that have shaped the perception of this art for a considerable time. In March 1938 Grey came across paintings near the Glenelg River, which were later identified to be in Worrorra and Ngarinyin territories (Elkin 1948). The identification of the actual rock paintings by Aboriginal elders finally also exposed the extent of George Grey’s ethnocentrism in his interpretations (see Donaldson 2007, 6–7). In his 1841 report he wrote that the »paintings were far superior to what a savage race could be supposed to be capable of« (quoted in Blundell/Woolagoodja 2005, 50). He experienced the encounter with the paintings as an encounter with »something silent, nameless and unfathomable« (quoted in Ryan/Akerman 1993, 11). His descriptions and drawings emphasized in a fascinating manner his predispositions, which lead him to search for resemblances and origins elsewhere. The sketch he presented seemed to show »a robed and haloed priest, apparently of some recent foreign origin« (Arndt 1964, 161). One of the halo headdresses was supposed to contain traces of an ancient script (with distant resemblances to Hebrew). Grey’s description produced many speculative theories in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and Wanjina art was »deemed to be the product of a succession of alien cultures – Egyptian, Phoenician, Chinese, Japanese, Hindu – even to represent knights in armour or strange visitors from outer space« (Ryan/Akerman 1993, 11). »In 1886, Curr […] suggested an origin in ›Chinese and Malays living among the Aborigines‹ (Arndt 1964, 161). In 1902, Brockman, and in 1917 Basedow were inclined to ascribe the Wanjina to foreign origin; Thomas, in 1906, attributed the paintings to shipwrecked Timorese; Hill suggested a resemblance to Amain from Thebes in Egypt; Campbell and Statham favoured a Japanese origin; Carroll suggested an introduction of the figures by Arab traders; Mathews believed them to be representations of an Indian deity and other writers followed with suggestions of an origin in Persian sun cults (Arndt 1964, 161)« (Redmond 2002, 56). It needs to be stressed that all these authors made their statements without any fieldwork in the Kimberley and simply trusted Grey’s report and drawings. Clearly, they were very comfortable to deny any link between the art and the Australian Aborigines, simply on the grounds of the accepted ideas about global human cultural evolution and the position of ›art‹ in this context. In this sense, these theories mirror the situation in the context of European Palaeolithic cave art mentioned above, although in Australia the situation was further complicated by a very real fight for land and resources that took place between the different people involved. Redmond (2002) draws attention to the fact that not only the time of European speculation about the origins of the Wanjina coincides with the first hundred years of colonial occupation of the region. But also that the revival of some of the more bizarre theories, such as »Von Däniken’s [e.g. 1969] populist ›science faction‹ (and the ›New Age‹ incorporation of Indigenous religions into amalgams of the ›great traditions‹ that has followed it) emerged at the same historical moment that the question of Indigenous Australian land rights entered into the mainstream of Australian political life« (Redmond 2002, 56). However, from the 1970s onwards these ideas remained on the fringe of the debate as the number of ethnographic and also direct Indigenous contributions grew that showed the relevance, complexity and longevity of the Wanjina-Wunggurr cultural complex. This situation has possibly contributed to a shift in European interest towards the other major art form, Gwion Gwion, which became the focus of a similar intense debate in more recent decades.
5. *Gwion Gwion* rock-art: Origins and ownership

Joseph Bradshaw became the first European to see this distinctive class of rock-art and report about it at the General Meeting of the Royal Geographical Society in September 1891. The images subsequently became known as ‘Bradshaw figures’. However, the traditional custodians of the rock-paintings (Ngarinyin, Worrorra, Woonambal) refer to these images as *Gwion Gwion* (e.g. Doring 2000; Mowaljarlai/Malnic 1993), therefore this latter term is used here. Starting from the newly established port of Wyndham, Joseph Bradshaw travelled west across the Kimberley in 1891 in search for suitable land for pastoral use. While he was not successful in this endeavour, he reported subsequently about different aspects of the country and the rock-images he encountered. During his travel his party was constantly observed by Aboriginal men. Although no major confrontation developed, no contact was established either. Bradshaw (1892, 99) described the men as tattooed and painted and also mentioned their »imposing head-gears … extending upwards and obliquely outwards from the top of [their] heads«.

During his investigation of rock shelters in the region of the Prince Regent River, he found »native paintings« of human figures, which were in some cases life-size, »the bodies and limbs very attenuated, and represented as having numerous tassel-shaped adornments appended to the hair, neck, waist, arms, and legs« (Bradshaw 1892, 100). He continues to emphasise that the »most remarkable fact in connection with these drawings is that wherever a profile face is shown the features are of the most pronounced aquiline type, quite different from those of any natives we encountered«. The term »aquiline« was used most often in art historical or physical anthropological contexts to refer to European classical Roman or Egyptian facial characteristics (e.g. in Petri 1954, 13). Accordingly, Bradshaw (1892, 100) continues that »one might almost think himself viewing the painted walls of an ancient Egyptian temple«. In contrast, other imagery that was painted over and alongside these paintings was described by him as »crude forms«. Finally, he reported noticing »alphabetical characters, somewhat similar to those seen by Sir George Grey in nearly the same latitude, but many miles westwards on the Glenelg River« (Bradshaw 1892, 100).

Obviously, Bradshaw was very aware of the findings of George Grey and his interpretations. He was also very happy to take up the suggestion that the »Bradshaw figures« had their origins outside of Australia. It is interesting in this respect that Bradshaw was concentrating so much on this perspective that he did not notice the similarities between the paintings that he described and the Aboriginal men he described as well (see above). Although this is a field that still needs to be looked at more systematically, it is clear that in *Gwion Gwion* rock-art numerous references exist to material culture items as well as ritual paraphernalia of the local Indigenous groups (e.g. Redmond 2002, 58). One might suspect that Bradshaw’s interpretation is a typical product of the dominant evolutionistic and racist narratives of the 19th century and that they were put to rest in the course of the 20th century. However, as was mentioned above, this is indeed not the case, as crucial elements of this perspective were resurrected in the last decades and continue to play a role in present-day conflicts about land rights and Native Title claims.
For many years, research and recording of *Gwion Gwion* rock-art has largely been associated with the work of the late Grahame Walsh. Before he died in 2007, he amassed what is possibly the largest collection of photographs and recordings of *Gwion Gwion* rock-art, as well as two visually-stunning volumes on the subject (Walsh 1994; 2000). However, he was also the author of highly controversial interpretations of the *Gwion Gwion*, suggesting that they were the product of a pre-Aboriginal ‘race’ – an argument which has critical implications for Indigenous rights and Native Title in Australia and places »Aboriginal people in the position of having to demonstrate cultural authenticity and legitimacy« (McNiven/Russell 1997, 807). Walsh’s (1994; 2000) development and steadfast defence of an explanatory scheme of Kimberley rock-art, which sought to locate *Gwion Gwion* rock-art outside of Aboriginal art traditions garnered considerable national and international media attention (e.g. radio and television interviews). However, his failure to recognize the incredibly diverse nature of rock-art styles across Australia, explore other possibilities regarding cultural significance and/or stylistic links from within Australia, and consult with other Indigenous groups in the area resulted in a skewed interpretation of *Gwion Gwion* rock-art. Furthermore, Walsh’s critics (e.g. McNiven/Russell 1997; Redmond 2002; Lewis 1997) have pointed out that the treatment of *Gwion Gwion* rock-art can be understood as part of a long tradition of disempowerment and alienation within a colonial and racist discourse. In a modern context these ideas made a revival in Walsh’s (1992) argument that no claim of Aboriginal descent could establish curation rights over cultural heritage that is supposed to belong to all humanity (see also Mowaljarlai et al. 1988).

Walsh’s views and theories continue to be of great popularity with non-Indigenous audiences. These theories have also captured the imagination of several non-academic writers (e.g. Wilson 2006; Parker et al. 2007) who have produced a number of books on the subject based on a less-than-factual basis (see Smith 2006). These non-academic books reach a wide audience and continue to transport an understanding of *Gwion Gwion* rock-art that is highly unbalanced and marginalizes Aboriginal viewpoints. Walsh’s views do take on an additional dimension, when they are placed in the post-colonial contexts of the socio-political environment in the Kimberley today. The latter is very much characterized by conflicts over the access to land and its use. After the Federal Court of Australia recognized for the first time the possibility that Aboriginal groups can claim Native Title rights over their lands in 1993, this has lead to a large number of court cases all over the continent. While the details of these processes are beyond the scope of this chapter, it needs to be stressed that Indigenous Australians can only achieve the recognition of Native Title over a particular tract of land if they can demonstrate a continuous and integral cultural association with it. It is clear that such a determination can be very difficult on different levels, especially given the disruption of Aboriginal lives in the last two hundred years as well as considerable population displacements. Obviously, oral histories, Aboriginal stories and narratives do play the most important element in this context. But as was explained above, in the Kimberley the existence and continuing relevance of rock-art for Aboriginal people also is a major factor in this context. Consequently, Walsh’s claims of a disassociation of Aboriginal beliefs and *Gwion Gwion* rock-art do take on a different significance as this
interpretation can have considerable consequences in the determination of Aboriginal claims to their ancestral country (see Redmond 2002; 2005).

Walsh’s work and the popular representation that he created of himself consist of a very interesting mosaic that fits very well into the imagination of certain groups of white Australians. There is a clear correspondence between the habitus that he presented and the theories that he put forward. He presented himself as the incarnation of the Australian white bushman that sets out alone to conquer the wilderness against the forces of nature. This image has powerful meaning in the construction of white Australian identity (see Ward 2003) and Walsh also was sometimes portrayed in opposition to academic archaeologists, who were not supposed to have the same field experience. In this way, Walsh also transported a vision of nature and the wilderness as a foreign and distant place with hidden secrets and civilisations. While this view fits well into the Western imagination of nature (see e.g. Cartmill 1993; Ingold 2000), it is completely alien to the understanding of Indigenous Australians. As was outlined above, for Aboriginal Australians the Kimberley is very much a well-known country with a well-known elaborate social and cultural geography.

The latter, however, also needs to be seen in relation to different cultural and social restrictions that influence and order Aboriginal relationships and these are not immediately obvious or even accessible to the Western viewer. As Redmond (2002, 58) points out, the »importance of the Gwion to local cosmogony emerges most strongly in the restricted walungarri ritual context, since it was the Gwion who are said to have introduced the ›circle dance‹ for initiation, as well as the stone-tipped spear; a technology that is intimately bound into Ngarinyin concepts of ›making men‹ from boys«.

In addition to attempts to protect culturally restricted knowledge, statements by Aboriginal informants in the literature cannot be taken at face value, but need to be carefully considered in its social and discursive context. When, for example, an Aboriginal elder responded with the remark that ›these were rubbish paintings‹ when inquired about Gwion Gwion art, this could mean a number of different things. The term is sometimes used to describe »someone who is very old and maybe no longer active« but it can also mean »not dangerous, friendly« or even »someone who is too young and inexperienced for an important political role« (Redmond 2002, 58). Consequently, the combination of these factors with a particular cultural disposition and the willingness to misinterpret or be selective with respect to the available evidence can lead to serious misrepresentations. Walsh’s ideas appear to be a dangerous romanticism that simplifies the complexity of the existing archaeological and ethnographic evidence. His search for an ›Erudite culture‹ that supposedly preceded the Wanjina-Wunggur cultural complex (which was regarded by Walsh as artistically and culturally inferior) connects to a reductionist idea of culture in general. It also reflects a unilinear idea of cultural development that sees the ethnographic present as a degeneration of an imaginary Golden Age. In this sense, Walsh and his supporters became the victims of their own imaginations and narratives that they were following. Even though Walsh attempted to present himself very much ›in touch‹ with the Australian wilderness, his views were very much a reflection of ideas that were ultimately born at the desks of European armchair researchers.
6. The rock-art of the Kimberley today

Indigenous art of the Kimberley continues to be of considerable interest among both Australians and visitors from abroad. While tourism is generally welcomed as a source of income by the different Aboriginal groups, it also presents a threat to rock-art and other sacred sites. As was mentioned above, the Wanjina-Wunggurr cultural landscape is a complex social geography that contains restrictions of access according to age, sex or social affiliation. Unfortunately, tourist enterprises continue to bring foreign visitors to rock-art sites from yachts and boats without prior Indigenous consultations. These visits already are having detrimental effects on the environment, archaeological evidence and rock-art. Because of the ruggedness of the shoreline and the difficulties of physical access or maintaining a permanent watch along the coast, these incursions remain mostly undetected and are difficult to prevent. The different Aboriginal corporations in the Kimberley as well as the Kimberley Land Council, the major representative Aboriginal body in the Kimberley, are running local ranger programs to monitor these developments and their effects. However, unless European or Asian tourists do not develop the appropriate level of cultural sensitivity towards the art and its contexts, any control will be hard to sustain and will lead to ongoing grievances and frustrations by Aboriginal people.

At the time of writing, a significant further process is under way to further recognize the importance of the Kimberley rock-art as a whole as well as the cultural landscape associated with it. In February 2008 the Australian and Western Australian governments agreed to facilitate a National Heritage assessment of the western Kimberley, which should identify places of »outstanding heritage value to the nation«. Any place that will be included on the National Heritage List will be protected by federal law and any action potentially impacting a site will need approval from the Federal Government. In addition to the different Native Title decisions that have been made in the Kimberley, this important process will hopefully further contribute to the protection of the art, the stories, narratives and the traditions associated with it. As the Kimberley Land Council writes in a recent information flyer, »to Kimberley Aboriginal people, heritage is infinitely more than a list of places. Their heritage places are not simply artefacts of a no longer existent culture, but are living vibrant places, which have contemporary meaning. They are places that nurture and sustain the people of the Kimberley today and provide the basis for their continued survival as a people«. In this sense, archaeological and rock-art research are both handed a particular responsibility in dealing with people and evidence and in constructing narratives.

References

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