CHAPTER 2

Change and Tradition in West Arnhem Land Rock Art

Rock art in west Arnhem Land is ancient. The intricate designs follow laws set down by Ancestral Beings and the Old People millennia ago. The reds, browns, yellows, and whites are created by pigment and ochres, the black by charcoal. Some are sourced locally, others were traded across the continent and ground into a paint, just as has been done for generations. The longevity of these traditions gives them an aura of timelessness. But admirers of west Arnhem Land rock art might also notice another colour in the artworks: blue. The blue is not a soft grey, aged pigment, or charcoal; colours you might expect from natural pigments. It is bright, almost electric blue (Figures 2.1 and 2.2). That's because it is made of laundry whitener.

When missionaries came to west Arnhem Land, they kept their whites crisp and bright. After all, appearing 'civilised' was half their mission. So they brought their laundry whiteners with them. Reckitt's Blue, a popular brand, was a bright powder that came pressed in tablet form. It was compact, portable and, as Bininj quickly found, an excellent pigment on rock, fibre, and bark. A pair of Anglican missionaries from Adelaide set up their station at Kapalga in west Arnhem in 1899. Whether Bininj were raiding the laundry or whether they traded for Reckitt's Blue is not quite clear. What is clear, however, is that the colour soon became a striking feature of what non-Indigenous scholars presumed was a 'timeless' or 'unchanging' rock art tradition.[1]

West Arnhem rock art featured blue highlights, figures, and patterns until around 1960, when it vanished.[2] Blue disappears even earlier from regional collections of material culture including bark paintings. This, we suspect, is because non-Indigenous collectors such as anthropologist Baldwin Spencer suggested it was inauthentic and as such to be discouraged and disparaged. Evidence of Aboriginal engagement with the material culture of their colonisers, they presumed, was evidence of a disintegrating tradition.

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FIGURE 2.1 Firearm featuring the use of laundry blue, Awunbarna (Mt Borradaile) in west Arnhem Land. Photograph: Sally K. May, courtesy of Traditional Owner Charlie Mungulda.

But in recent years, Bininj have insisted otherwise. Co-author Gabriel Maralngurra is at the forefront of reviving and exploring the laundry blue tradition (Figures 2.3 and 2.11). Maralngurra is an accomplished artist. His work adheres to the laws laid down by his ancestors and is deeply respectful of received tradition. But he also insists that the work of more recent ancestors is also of value. In this way, the blue finds a home in his artworks. His work is traditional yet also innovative, conservative and dynamic, all at once.

Holding his first blue painting, Gabriel Maralngurra explained that the image is deeply embedded in ancient tradition. Ancient rock art styles are superimposed on more recent subject matter: the strolling buffalo in the background. The painting honours the work of his ancestors on the rocks:

> Reckitt's Blue was good to paint with, my first experience painting with it made me like the colour. It looks like someone just painted it on the rock. It was my first time experimenting with the Reckitt's Blue. I had photographs of rock art painted with Reckitt's Blue, and I have seen rock art painted with the colour at Mount Borridale when I was a tour guide. Barramundi and *kumoken* [freshwater crocodile] are similar in the rock art

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FIGURE 2.2 Rock art featuring laundry blue, Awunbarna (Mt Borradaile) in west Arnhem Land. Photograph: Sally K. May, courtesy of Traditional Owner Charlie Mungulda.

> because they are both freshwater animals. It relays back in the past, showing how our ancestors were painting on the rock with the Reckitt's Blue. *Mimihs* [spirit beings] have been painted with these types of heads on the rocks, I painted these ones to look like *mimihs* on the rock art.[3]

So we have a paradox. How can Bininj art be both historically contingent and responsive as well as traditional and changeless? This chapter turns to Bininj laws surrounding the creation of rock art to understand the ways in which art is innovative and responsive, as well as traditional and, in many ways, timeless. We begin with an overview of the richness and diversity of rock art in west Arnhem Land. By explaining how rock art arises from Bininj kinship and ceremonial systems we show how the checks and

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FIGURE 2.3 Gabriel Maralngurra with his first attempt at using laundry blue as part of his artwork in 2019. Photograph and courtesy by Alex Ressel.

balances governing its creation have ensured the tradition has endured, continuously, over millennia. There are rules that guide its interpretation over the ages and mean it can be 'read' generations after its creation. At the same time, we argue that it can also be understood as a historical practice that is dynamic and responsive, and that it can create and communicate historical memory and particular experiences, keeping records for generations to come.

What Is Rock Art?

What makes for rock art is not always immediately apparent. Paintings on rocks are the most obvious example. Some kind of human intentionality to create an image must be involved; grooves that are left from sharpening tools are not art. Graffiti, sprayed only yesterday, counts: rock art is not only the work of so-called 'traditional' societies. And there must be rocks; scholars would not consider patterns in the sand or etchings on trees as rock art.

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Rock art archaeologists define rock art as deliberate, human-made markings on rock surfaces. These include paintings, drawings, engravings, stencils, prints, and bas-relief carvings and figures made from materials such as beeswax. They are often found in rock-shelters, caves, or on standalone boulders. Rock art is surprisingly ubiquitous. You can find rock art across the world. Perhaps the most famous example are the cave complexes in southern France and northern Spain, such as Altamira, Lascaux, Chauvet, Niaux, and Cosquer. Lascaux is estimated to be 17,000 years old. It features over 600 paintings of mostly large animals. Valued for their beauty and their ability to provide unequalled insights into the lives and beliefs of our ancestors, these caves are flagships for rock art internationally. The time and resources committed to its protection by France, Spain, and the international community are the envy of most other countries with rock art heritage.

Although the European art is famous, rock art also appears widely across the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. It is surprisingly difficult to date rock art (it cannot be taken to a lab for testing). Nonetheless, archaeologists believe that Australia and Southeast Asia are home to rock art as old, and even older, than anything so far recorded in Europe.[4] Much of it was created in short bursts of activity, but, in some places, the art was part of a longstanding artistic tradition over many centuries, even millennia. In some places, artists are still creating rock art today. In this book, we focus on rock art from northern Australia and, specifically, west Arnhem Land and the art of the people, Bininj, who live there for our case studies (Figures 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3). We do this because their work represents arguably the world's longest continuing artistic tradition.[5] In west Arnhem Land, rock art is not a thing of the past, but of the present and future.

West Arnhem Land Cultures and Law

It is for good reason that west Arnhem Land is regularly highlighted for its extraordinary rock art heritage.[6] For thousands of years artists painted on rock surfaces, illustrating complex cultural belief systems, ancestral stories and all kinds of animals. Art is a key part of Bininj life and likely always will be.

Kakadu National Park (henceforth, Kakadu) takes up a large part of west Arnhem Land. Many of our case studies come from within this World Heritage listed area. The mining town of Jabiru is the largest regional centre in Kakadu. The East Alligator River marks the boundary between Kakadu National Park and Arnhem Land (that is, Aboriginal land, part of

which is included in the 'west Arnhem Land' region). Crossing this river leads you to the small Aboriginal community of Gunbalanya (formerly Oenpelli). Even today, away from the pressures of tourism and mining found in Kakadu, hundreds of artists live and work here, as they have done since the township was established as a homestead by buffalo shooter Paddy Cahill in 1910.[7] Injalak Arts, a community art centre, was developed by, and continues to support, artists from across west Arnhem Land.[8] All artists highlighted in this book had strong ties to Gunbalanya.

Plenty of anthropologists and archaeologists have attested to and documented the sophistication and cultural complexity of Aboriginal life in west Arnhem Land.[9] Contact with outsiders has not diminished Aboriginal cultural and kinship systems; these are strong today, even after decades of intrusions from pastoralists, missionaries, miners, and tourists. Aboriginal people in this area are not one homogenous group. Instead, they belong to various clans and many have their own particular identifying dialects (called 'languages' locally). There are six mutually intelligible dialects in the region. Of the six, *Kunwinjku* is the most prominent. But language is not the only affiliation. Within these are clan groups. Bininj are born into their clan through their father's side. But mothers' and grandmothers' affiliations are important too. Their clan and Country give people rights and obligations to care for certain places and animals through cultural protocols. In fact, the case studies in this book highlight just how important 'mother's Country' was (and is) to an individual's life, including their obligations and their rights to paint.

Adding to the complexity is the fact that all Bininj (and invited others) are embedded in a kinship system that orders their relationship to others. In west Arnhem Land, this includes eight kinship subsections that help to classify and structure kin relations (Figure 2.4). This system determines your relationship to everyone else, including who you can marry. For example, if you are Ngalbulanj, everybody with the skin name Ngalkamarrang is your mother, your sons are all Nawamud, your daughters are all Ngalwamud and you must marry someone who is Nakangila (or, as a second choice, Nawakadj). Bininj must treat these kinship relations with respect.

The kinship system also places you within a broader cultural system. Everyone belongs to either the *Ngarradjku* or *Mardku* moieties, an identity inherited from their mothers. Everyone also belongs to either the *Duwa* or *Yirridjdja* moieties, which is inherited through fathers. Further, people inherit 'skin' of either stone (*kunwardde*), sun (*kundung*), green ant (*kabo*), or fire (*kunak*) from their father, categories that are important for ceremonial

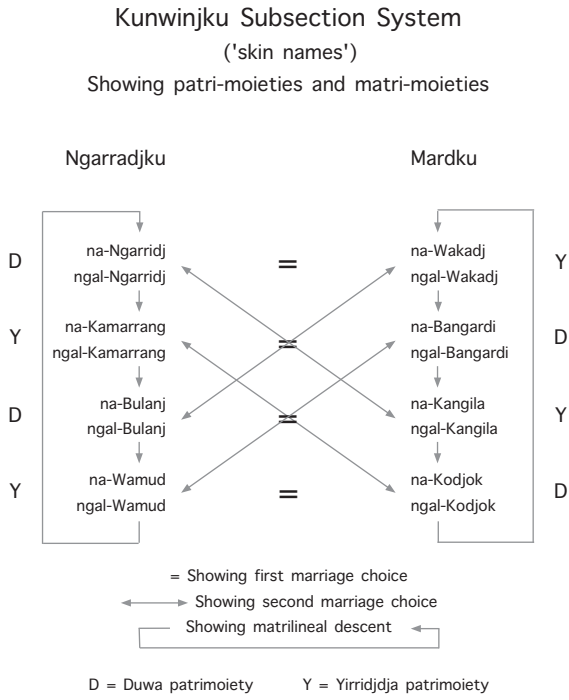

FIGURE 2.4 Kinship subsections of west Arnhem Land. Diagram by Joakim Goldhahn.

life.[10] The kinship system extends to non-human (or 'more-than-human') beings, relating flora and fauna, rivers and seas, rocks on the ground, and stars in the sky into a great network of belonging.

We cannot share much about Bininj ritual life here. Although ceremonies were and continue to be an important aspect of cultural life, much information on these activities remains restricted as secret knowledge. Both men and women pass through different stages of ceremony. These cultural gatherings are important for the sharing of cultural knowledge, initiation of youths, celebrations of life and death, and trade and exchange. They sometimes included actions that ensured the renewal of plants and animals in the landscape. Other times, ceremonies were enacted to ensure spirits and Ancestral Beings were duly respected.

Long ago, Ancestral Beings formed sacred (*djang*) places in the landscape. Such places are associated with specific creation stories associated with and owned by a specific clan group. Management of these places

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is governed by Bininj according to roles of 'owners' and 'managers'. Ownership comes with the obligation to care and protect *djang* places, and transmit these protocols to emerging generations of clan owners.

But the owners themselves are rarely the ones who conduct such cultural practices. That is for the managers. The managers, or 'bosses', had different names in different areas, but are generally referred to as *djungkay* today. *Djungkay* are responsible for conducting the necessary tasks and ceremonies that care for a clan's *djang* sites. Some Bininj translate this role as 'cultural police' working under the instructions of senior Traditional Owners, as *djungkay* guard and protect the sacred sites on behalf of the clans who own them. Sometimes the owners themselves are not permitted to visit these sites; the ancestral powers are too strong and dangerous for their presence. Instead, the visitation and preservation of these sites is the responsibility of the *djungkay*, as they have authority to deflect the spiritual power that resides there.[11]

Usually, Bininj are *djungkay* for sites in their mother's Country; however, another knowledgeable person might also be assigned to play this role. Following the local clan system, the *djungkay* for one moiety must always be a member of the other moiety. Importantly, *djungkay* have the right to visit sacred places, learn the ancestral stories, and produce ritual objects, painting designs and subjects of an owning clan, and do not need to ask permission to do so. The system creates a kind of check and balance to the transfer of cultural knowledge down the generations. Whereas one moiety might own the knowledge, the other side polices it; both halves working together to ensure all things are done the proper way.

All this matters if we are to begin to engage with west Arnhem Land rock art, as it is embedded within these cultural systems and their associated cultural protocols. The artworks are guided by these cultural protocols through the painted subject matter and its associations, the pigment and the places where the artworks are created.

Painting Protocols

Rock art in west Arnhem Land was not a mere human invention. Its creation was (and is) governed by more-than-human beings. The creation of rock art was introduced by the Ancestral Beings and other Spirit Beings of west Arnhem Land. The Ancestors were Creative Beings who travelled over the landscape long ago, in the time outsiders have called the 'Dreaming'. As they journeyed they left their 'shadows' in the form of rock art. Their acts and examples set down the law and protocols,

embedding them in the Country they formed as they travelled. These laws include those governing the creation of rock art: when, where, how, and by whom it can be made. Other kinds of beings, such as the *mimih*, taught people long ago how to supply food, to dance, sing, and paint.

Although an ongoing and living tradition, art practice in west Arnhem Land is, in many ways, conservative. This is because, as explained above, the rules for art were determined not by humans but by the Ancestors and other Spirit Beings who command respect. Artists, therefore, conform to strict protocols in place to control subject matter, technique, and materials.[12] For example, while there was likely variation at all times in the rock art, artists continued to produce some styles over significant lengths of time – millennia even – with very little change. What archaeologists have dubbed 'X-ray' rock art (that is, paintings of animals with internal features illustrated) is an example. West Arnhem artists persisted in creating these for over two or three thousand years with little change to their general form.[13] Such continuity across the generations was possible through carefully passing down pigment, subject matter, technique, and clan-specific styles, through carefully controlled processes of apprenticeship, under strict social control.

Given these longstanding continuities, it is hardly surprising that very recent rock artists continue to abide by artistic protocols. There are rules for subject matter, style, colour, and even technique.[14] Artists cannot paint whatever they might feel like. Rather, an artist must inherit or earn the rights to paint particular subjects. The most serious artists undertake an apprenticeship with master artists to enhance their skills and broaden their potential repertoire of stories to paint. The more accomplished the artist, in skill, ceremony, and cultural seniority, the more subject matters the artist might paint. But, even then, anything painted is policed and checked by the *djungkay*, the 'bosses' of cultural knowledge. As Gabriel Maralngurra explains, those for whom it is 'their Country, it's always been' must still 'chat with the boss' before painting.[15] When it comes to Maralngurra's mother's Country, however, he is the 'boss':

> I've got the right to tell the story. This is my mother's land, this is what I've painted, and it's come from the land where the dreaming is, and that's where it's come from, from my grandfather and my mother. But I'm the *djungkay*. I'm the boss of that.[16]

So there is a double system of checking and authorising – that of the apprenticeship and that of the *djungkay*.

That artists observe strict protocol does not mean their art has been without innovation or change. Art created since colonisation began,

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in particular, represents a fascinating morphing of the old and new – of innovation and conservatism. Its creators were engaged in processes of social and cultural negotiation, leading to new rock art, bark paintings, and, eventually, the contemporary art scene we have today in Gunbalanya and other parts of west Arnhem Land.

The artists of west Arnhem Land produced an abundance of art and a multitude of styles over the millennia as they responded to, and reflected upon, life and landscape. Rock art researcher George Chaloupka summarised the different styles appearing over what he estimated to be a 40,000-year period.[17] For him, stylistic changes corresponded to environmental changes (for example, Pre-estuarine, Estuarine, and Freshwater) as the landscape changed drastically with climate change. The arid landscape flooded as sea levels rose and rose, eventually receding again, leaving wetlands in their wake. Archaeologist and historian Darrell Lewis took a different approach, building his chronology around material culture depicted on the rocks, focusing on spear throwers.[18] More recently, archaeologists have refined their chronologies further through even deeper analyses of individual sites and styles.[19] Table 2.1 provides an overview of rock art styles in west Arnhem Land and their archaeological chronology, with images included below.

TABLE 2.1 *General chronology for Arnhem Land rock art*[20]

Estimated Years BP	Main Rock Art Styles and Techniques	Regionalism	Environment
Unknown but pre-18,000	Various types of hand stencils and animal stencils; object and handprints	Pan Arnhem Land	Variable
18,000–15,000	Large Naturalistic Animals (including various extinct animals); hand stencils	Pan Arnhem Land	Arid and cool
15,000–13,000	Large Naturalistic Animals (including some extinct animals); hand stencils	Pan Arnhem Land	Arid and rising temperatures; sea level 120–140 m below present

(*continued*)

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TABLE 2.1 *(continued)*

Estimated Years BP	Main Rock Art Styles and Techniques	Regionalism	Environment
13,000–10,000	Dynamic Figures (mostly human but some animals, including the now extinct thylacine; very small to life-size) and associated stencils, especially material culture; grass prints	Pan Arnhem Land with regionalism developing	Arid; sea levels rise rapidly; flooding
10,000–6,000	Maliwawa Figures, Northern Running Figures, and Yam Figures; some large animals; rare thylacine depictions; Simple Figures start to appear; stencils	Highly regionalised	Sea levels rise more slowly; increasing rainfall; flooding
6,000–4,000	Multiple new styles and subjects (e.g. dingo) appearing including moderate to small-sized Simple Figures and Bininj Kunburrk Figures; stencils	Simple Figures are Pan Arnhem Land but there are several forms that vary in concentrations regionally; Kunburrk Figures are in one region only	Sea level stabilised; maximum effective precipitation
4,000–2,000	Early X-ray and associated paintings of humans and animals (moderate size), stencils and prints that develop into the Complete Figure Style	Pan Arnhem Land with regionalism developing	ENSO begins to dominate; increasing climatic variability; sharply decreasing rainfall
2,000–500	Detailed X-ray and other aspects of the Complete Figure Style, including large humans and animals, stencils and prints	Regionalisation	Increasing climatic variability; decreased rainfall

(*continued*)

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TABLE 2.1 *(continued)*

Estimated Years BP	Main Rock Art Styles and Techniques	Regionalism	Environment
500–present	X-ray and other aspects of the Complete Figure Style plus introduced subject matter, including large humans and animals, stencils and prints	Regionalisation	Contact period and changing cultural and climatic environments

FIGURE 2.5 An example of hand stencils from the Walkarr shelter, Kakadu National Park. Photograph: Joakim Goldhahn, courtesy of Traditional Owner Jonathan Yarramarrna Nadji.

The earliest rock art artists of western Arnhem Land painted large naturalistic animals. They also created hand stencils and prints of grass and hands, as did their descendants for thousands of years (Figure 2.5). Around 13,000 years ago, artists began painting what Chaloupka dubbed 'Dynamic Figure rock art'. This includes some of the earliest examples of scenes of human activities found anywhere in the world (Figure 2.6).[21] Their descendants during the early Holocene expanded their artistic practice to include 'Northern Running Figures', 'Maliwawa Figures', and 'Yam Figures' (Figure 2.7). Artists first created the famous X-ray rock art of the region some 4,000 years ago and continue to create it today (Figure 2.8).

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FIGURE 2.6 Dynamic Figure rock art from Burrungkuy area, Kakadu National Park. Photograph: Sally K. May, courtesy of Traditional Owner Jeffrey Lee.

FIGURE 2.7 Example of an early Holocene art tradition, Northern Running Figures, west Arnhem Land. Photograph: Tristen Jones, courtesy of Traditional Owner Alfred Nayinggul.

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FIGURE 2.8 Barramundi fish painted using X-ray technique, Injalak Hill, west Arnhem Land. Photograph: Sally K. May, courtesy of Traditional Owner Julie Narndal Gumurdul.

Recent Rock Art – Archives of Contact Histories

When newcomers arrived in Aboriginal land in northern Australia, the artists continued their work. In fact, rock art production increased with Aboriginal encounters with Southeast Asians and Europeans. While continuing to paint many older rock art subjects and styles, artists introduced new ideas into their rock art repertoire. These included new subject matter such as sailing vessels, firearms and introduced animals such as buffalo and horses (Figure 2.9).[22] They also created new styles that did not depict introduced materials or animals but were nonetheless marked by contact and invasion experiences. Intricately painted hand figures (see Figure 2.2), with patterns that convey ritual meanings, for instance, indicate the ongoing significance of ceremony in the face of social disruption.[23] By making these marks, they recorded this recent history on the rocks.

As Bininj encountered new people, animals, and objects they experimented with new ways of seeing the world. But this did not mean abandoning what was 'ancient' or 'traditional' about their cultures or, in the case of rock art, throwing off the rules that governed the creation of artwork. Instead,

FIGURE 2.9 A European boat with a dinghy painted by Charlie Whittaker at Nanguluwurr, Kakadu National Park. Note the use of blue pigment on the barramundi fish figure. Photograph: Joakim Goldhahn, courtesy of Traditional Owner Jeffrey Lee.

they were selective. They took what was useful, interesting, and desirable and incorporated these into pre-existing practices and norms.[24] West Arnhem Land people have found ways to accommodate innovation while upholding changelessness as an important value. As Gabriel Maralngurra explains, Bininj were ready to experiment with the new resource:

> Back in the mission days they used to use the Reckitt's Blue for washing clothes. It was like a, what do you call this? Washing powder. That's what they've been using, but Bininj people thought it was for painting on rocks, that's why they maybe, not steal it, but got it from someone and took it, and tried it on the rocks . . . they didn't know what colour they'd been using, because they used to use red, white and yellow. But they'd never seen blue. This was the first time. Just paint and make it more decorative art on the rock. That's how the Reckitt's Blue became so familiar. They started painting on rocks.[25]

As described in the beginning of this chapter, when Bininj gained access to the blue pigment of laundry whitener, they found it enhanced the telling of old stories in art and invigorated existing traditions. This was not

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a demolition of culture; it was a new expression of an age-old culture for the present generation. Rock art throughout west Arnhem Land that features laundry blue adheres to the same laws governing its creation and content as the most ancient of art. Yet it also tells us of new engagement with colonisers on Bininj Country. This art arose from a particular historical moment and testified to the experience of colonisation for generations to come.[26] Gabriel Maralngurra explained that he was in fact following his ancestors through his experimentation with laundry blue. Just as they experimented in their circumstances, while still respecting their Old People, he has done the same in his art:

> The ancestors used Reckitt's Blue to paint with because it was new, they probably thought it looked a lot like the ochres they paint with, they were experimenting with new colours in a similar way to how I experimented with Reckitt's Blue on this painting. Balanda brought this rock in the mission days.[27]

The present generation of Bininj is especially interested in reviving the practices of those who first endured the intrusions of the colonisers, finding in this generation a source of inspiration and resilience for people of the present day. And so blue has taken on new significance, both culturally and historically, as artists such as Gabriel Maralngurra engage multiple temporalities in their practice.

Conclusion

Rock art of west Arnhem Land is both a living, dynamic tradition and also, paradoxically perhaps, a changeless manifestation of ancient law, set down by the Ancestors. It is innovative, new and responsive to its environment and social milieu while also being bound to respect customs that derive their timeless power and authority from the landscape itself. This interplay of change and conservatism means that it might be possible to 'read' art from long ago – through the guidance of cultural leaders – because even old art abides by these laws. It can be 'read' and understood by Bininj many generations after its creation; the old laws governing its form and content still abide today. Yet it is also possible to identify historical change, innovation, and even the influence of individual artists in response to their historical circumstances. There is particularity and nuance in response to historic events and change. The many ways in which the practice of creating rock art is tied to historical practice, memory, and archiving are the focus of the rest of this book.

REFLECTIONS ON CHANGE AND TRADITION

Gabriel Maralngurra

Well this painting, it's a good story. It's about our culture, our traditions with painting but also about new ideas that our Old People had: old way and new way. The Old People had strong law, even for artists. But they could change things too. They could try new things. Sometimes it wasn't really new, sometimes it just came back again after sleeping for a long time, like the *nganaparru* [buffalo].[28] What I mean is that our culture is strong, but those Old People could try new things too. That inspired my painting. I've painted two hand stencils, a female figure and a *namarnkol* [barramundi]. All of them in X-ray, even the woman.

The hands we call *kunbidbok* in language. It means hand stencil or handprint. That's what we say in *Kunwinjku*. The infill is called *rarrk*. It's like a pattern, or a bit more, to make it look good, putting decorations or whatever in a pattern. That's what Old People used to draw on rocks, decorate their hands. But it is also something else, not just decoration. The person would be there with his family, travelling, camping and painting.

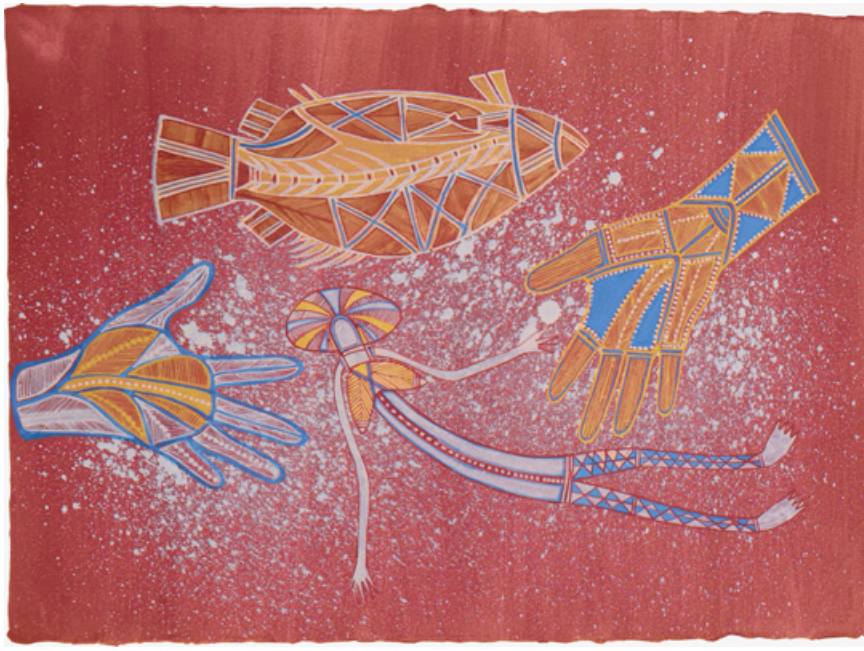

FIGURE 2.10 History on the Rocks II. Artist: Gabriel Maralngurra.

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FIGURE 2.11 Creating 'History on the Rocks II'. Photo: Sally K. May.

That's how Bininj used to do it, travelling, camping with other families, putting their hand stencils, like a mark. That's how they used to sign their paintings, or, even teaching next young ones, they would leave a signature.

The female figure is inspired by rock art at Burrungkuy, Jeffrey Lee's Country, but it's from my head. I know that picture, but I made it my own. On her head it might be a headdress or it might be big hair. Maybe, the Old People they had dreadlocks. That's why you see some people in the rock art with their heads like this, they probably did have dreadlocks, the first Bininj.

The fish is *namarnkol*, the barramundi. That's a favourite fish up here but it is more than just good food. That fish sits with cultural stories, *djang* places, even ceremony. You see it all the time in the rock art, the Old People loved painting it. We do today too. We paint it the same way as the Old People, with the X-ray, the insides showing, the important bits showing.

You might notice the blue colour. It might look like a new thing but the Old People have been painting with blue for a long time. I heard rumours

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that the blue came from the new settlement, back at Gunbalanya, in the mission days. Balanda used blue cubes, like Reckitt's Blue, for washing clothes. It was like washing powder. That's what they've been using, but Bininj people thought it was for painting on rocks, that's why they, maybe, not steal it, but, got it from someone, and took it, and tried it on the rocks. I've used this same old Reckitt's Blue for this painting, an old blue cube that you don't see much anymore.

Imagine the first time they were painting with the blue pigment on the rock, they didn't know this colour, because they were used to red, white, and yellow. Some also use black, but that is more common in eastern Arnhem Land. They'd never seen blue. This was the first time. Just, paint and make it more decorative, art on the rock. That's how the Reckitt's Blue became so familiar, they started painting on rocks. The other colours have moiety though, blue doesn't. That's okay, because it's just a colour, because they've got that colour from the missionaries. Don't have to give them moiety. Also, no-one, no-one controls the blue, it's just blue.

The first time I saw the blue painting was at Mt Borradaile (Awunbarna) when I did my second tour guide training, my certificate for tour guiding. That's where I went over there with the boys from Injalak. We had a look around and I saw this blue painting there, handprints, that's what reminds me of the blue painting. Where did they get that blue from? And then I heard that story: it came from the missionaries.

The Old People knew blue colour. They'd seen it in bird feathers, but they were wondering can we find a blue, so we can do that on the rock. That's what they were saying to themselves. And then one day it came about. The mission was first established at Gunbalanya and they've got this Reckitt's Blue, people have been working there, Bininj people working there, seen this Reckitt's Blue, and they probably got it. They used it to paint different things in the rock art: hands, guns, boats, fish, even turtle, the pig-nose turtle, *warradjan*, that's painted in Kakadu.

Those old men kept painting rock art with this blue for a long time. Even until the 1960s they say. They liked it, they probably used it like bright colour, just to make the painting stand out. Just to add a little bit of blue, because you've got red, white, and yellow, and then put blue, a little bit of blue on that fish. The fish will show up on the figure, like *mimih*.

I wanted to think about these things with this painting: new colour, rock art, and the Old People who tried painting with it for the first time. Nice history. The Old People, the artists, were clever; they made this rock art and we're still talking about it today. Makes the rock art good to think with. We need to keep telling these stories.

Notes

1. Emily Miller et al., 'Kaparlgoo Blue: On the Adoption of Laundry Blue Pigment into the Visual Culture of Western Arnhem Land, Australia', *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 26, no. 2 (2022): 316–37.
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3. Gabriel Maralngurra in conversation, 11 April 2019.
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28. As will be explained in Chapter 6, unlike the European belief that buffalo were introduced to west Arnhem in the nineteenth century, Bininj understand that buffalo have always been on their Country.