

ABORIGINAL ART AND CULTURE IN THE KIMBERLEY AND ADJOINING AREAS: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

On 2 April 2008, Dr Phillip E Playford, a geologist and rock art enthusiast, shared some of his recent and not so recent observations with his fellow members of the Kimberley Society. His illustrated talk was broadly divided into four parts, dealing with (1) the first arrival of Aboriginal people in the Kimberley, (2) evidence of early Aboriginal culture as depicted in their rock art, (3) the traditional nomadic culture and lifestyles of Aborigines in desert country adjoining the Kimberley, and (4) changes that have occurred since the people lost their nomadic lifestyles.

It is generally accepted that people of the species *Homo sapiens* first arrived in Australia about 50,000 years ago, during the middle of the last ice age, when part of the present continental shelf was dry land. Over thousands of years before then, stone-age humans had migrated from island to island along the Indonesian archipelago, eventually reaching as far east as Timor and Roti. Boats or rafts would have been used to cross the short gaps between islands in the archipelago, but because those gaps were narrow and the adjoining land was high, people on the watercrafts were always able to keep in sight of land.

However, that would not have been so when they eventually crossed the wide expanse of ocean separating Timor from the Kimberley. That gap is nearly 500 km wide today, while the distance to the horizon at sea level is less than 5 km. When the first people reached Australia, sea level was 50 m lower than it is today, and there was still a gap of more than 400 km between Timor and the Australian mainland. Yet, because of the lower sea level, many present-day reefs southeast of Timor were exposed as small islands, the closest being along Hibernia Reef, about 120 km southeast of Timor. People from Timor may have first crossed the gap to those islands by chance, being swept there in a boat during a storm. They can be expected to have found rich animal life (fish, shellfish, birds, and turtles) on and around those islands, and would have taken that information back to Timor, prompting others to make the crossing. Some people would eventually have extended their hunting and gathering activities to a group of larger islands to the southwest (Ashmore and Cartier Islands). From there they could follow a line of smaller islands extending south towards Australia. A gap of about 130 km separated the closest of those islands from the Australian coast. Some intrepid people on that island may have resolved to seek new land to the south, thereby coming upon the mainland coast of Australia. Alternatively their boat may have been blown across the gap during a storm. In either case those stone-age people were the first humans to set foot on the Australian continent, some 50,000 years ago, having completed what was probably the longest ocean crossing by anyone in the world up to that

time. Perhaps their stories of this wondrous new land were passed back to Timor, resulting in a stream of migrants to the Kimberley during following years.

During the peak of the ice age, about 18,000 years ago, when sea level was some 130 m lower than it is now, the gap separating Timor from the Kimberley was reduced to about 120 km, and the distance from Timor to Hibernia Reef fell to about 80 km. That may have been the period when the maximum migration of pre-historic people took place to Australia, more than 30 millennia after the first humans had entered the continent. At that time rock painting flourished in the mountainous rocky area of the Kimberley, behind a very wide coastal plain.

An indication of the types of boats that were used by Aboriginal people during the peak of the ice age can be gained from the ancient Kimberley rock paintings known as Bradshaw or *Gwion Gwion* art. Associated with that art, and apparently of about the same age, are paintings of boats having high prows and sterns, and with people paddling them. Some boats are painted with longitudinal and vertical stripes along their sides, interpreted by some authorities as representing reed construction. That interpretation may be correct, but another alternative is that they were woven-bamboo boats, of a type that is still in use in Vietnam. Those sturdy boats have high prows and sterns, and are coated on the inside with plant resin or bitumen to make them waterproof. Bamboo is abundant in Timor, and it may well have been used for boat building by its early inhabitants. Thus it seems quite possible that the first vessel to reach the shores of Australia was a bamboo boat.

The Bradshaw paintings include graceful images of people, often with bent knees, long head-dresses, and decorative adornments, and commonly holding boomerangs or other objects. Minimal dating has been carried out on these paintings, but existing measurements suggest that some were painted about 17,000 to 20,000 years ago, i.e. near the peak of the last ice age, when the ocean gap from Timor to the Australian continent was at its narrowest. Some authorities have speculated that those artists are unrelated to modern Aborigines, and that their lineage disappeared thousands of years ago. It has also been pointed out that the persons depicted in the paintings seem to be participating in corroborees that have similar characteristics to such ceremonies held in historic times. The dancers in a corroboree photographed at Pago (in the north Kimberley, near Kalumburu) during the 1930s are strikingly similar to those shown in Bradshaw paintings, with bent knees, long head-dresses, and decorative adornments. It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that the Bradshaw people were among the ancestors of modern Aborigines, and that some aspects of their culture (including features of corroborees as shown in Bradshaw paintings) were maintained for many thousands of years. When the first people came to Australia, some 50,000 years ago, all

people on earth were living in the stone age, yet Aboriginal society remained in that age until it was displaced by the arrival of Europeans.

Perhaps the most important rock-art discovery made in Australia in recent years is that of a panel of about 25 deer paintings in the Mitchell River area of the Kimberley. The deer are shown standing in line along the wall of a quartzite rock shelter. Because of their age many are faded and otherwise degraded, or are partly covered with precipitates from water seepages, but some remain well preserved. This discovery was greeted with disbelief among some students of rock art, and one article absurdly described the figures as 'a set of genuflecting men painted on the rock face'. But there can be little doubt that the paintings do represent deer. They show four-legged animals with prominent antlers, and presumably represent the Timor Deer, *Cervus timorensis*, that was once very abundant as big herds on Timor. Those deer have now disappeared from that island, but the species has survived on reserves elsewhere in Indonesia and in several other countries, including eastern Australia, where they were introduced long ago. Some that occur on isolated islands are thought to have been introduced there by Indonesian fishermen.

Associated with the deer paintings are some of the representations of watercraft. There can be little doubt that all of these paintings belong to the Bradshaw era, and that they were probably painted some time around the peak of the last ice age, when voyages from Timor may have been most common. The deer could have been painted by someone who had come recently from Timor, bringing with him memories of those animals, or alternatively they might have been introduced into the Kimberley, but have since died out. If that is so, it seems surprising that no other deer paintings have yet been found in the area. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the Pleistocene coastal plain adjoining the mountainous country of the Kimberley would have been well suited to Timor Deer, as they are known to flourish in low-lying marsh country. If they were introduced to that coastal plain they probably died out as sea level rose and the plain disappeared at the close of the Pleistocene. The Thylacine or Tasmanian tiger is another mammal that features in Kimberley rock art but had disappeared from the area prior to the arrival of Europeans.

A more recent art form in the Kimberley is known as *Wandjina* art. This features large male figures, almost always shown without mouths. The earliest accounts suggested that these figures were clothed, but that view has not been accepted by most modern authorities. Nevertheless, it seems possible that the oldest *Wandjina* paintings, thought to date back only a few hundred years, were painted with clothes, and that they represented the earliest Europeans who arrived on the Kimberley coast, beginning with Abel Tasman in 1644. That view is supported by evidence from *Wandjina* art at Bigge Island in the North Kimberley, where *Wandjina*

figures appear to be smoking pipes. Moreover, some are shown aboard boats. Unfortunately, Tasman's log of that voyage has been lost, but it seems quite possible that he landed at Bigge Island, and encountered Aborigines there. Aborigines have claimed in recent times that the 'pipes' shown in the paintings are actually lily roots. However, it seems far more likely that the figures represent European seamen, clothed and smoking pipes. Those seamen would have seemed to the Aborigines to be supernatural beings, and may consequently have been incorporated into Aboriginal legends and rock art.

In 1964 the speaker was privileged to witness Aborigines who had never previously encountered whites, living in the Canning Stock Route area of the Great Sandy and Gibson Deserts, south of the Kimberley. He was a member of an expedition sent into the area to contact the few Aborigines still believed to be living there. The expedition was mounted because the area was supposed to be subjected to impacts by debris from British Blue Streak rockets, fired from Woomera in South Australia. The people in the area (belonging to the *Ngadadjarra* and *Pintubi* language groups) were leading traditional Aboriginal lifestyles, untouched by modern civilization. Altogether 71 individuals were located, in groups of up to ten persons. They were found by driving through the desert until smoke in the distance indicated their presence. The vehicles were then driven to within two or three kilometres of the smoke, when camp was made and a fire was lit. Eventually the Aborigines' curiosity overcame their fear and they walked into the camp. The men came first, followed an hour or two later by women and children. The last to approach were the Aborigines' domestic dingos.

The Aborigines' health was examined by a doctor, who also took blood samples from most adults and some children, for later examination in Perth. He found a surprisingly high level of morbidity among the people. Many had yaws, a disease caused by a spirochaete similar to that which causes syphilis (but yaws is non-venereal). It was dormant in most cases, being evident only in the blood samples, but one man had an advanced stage of the disease. Many individuals had symptoms of trachoma, and several had badly decayed teeth. So the commonly held belief that Aborigines were healthy while in their traditional state did not apply in those cases.

The people found on the expedition were naked and had no metallic implements — they possessed only wooden spears, woomeras, digging sticks, and coolamons, together with grinding stones and human-hair string used to bind their hair and as belts to hold the lizards that they killed. Female children had sticky seeds decorating their hair. Some men also carried small sacred objects from camp to camp, carefully wrapped in paper bark and tied up with human-hair string, ensuring that they were never seen by women and children. Each woomera had a sharp piece

of flint, glued in place at the end of the handle, and this was used as an adze for carving wood to make implements and coolamon containers. They camped in the open around rock holes and wells dug to the water table through sand. At that time there must have been hundreds of such wells scattered through the desert country, but all are now disused and no doubt filled by drifting sand. The Aborigines were fully occupied throughout each day in hunting and gathering food, which consisted mostly of lizards and vegetable products, especially seeds from various plants. They displayed remarkable skills in tracking lizards and other animals across the desert country.

All of the nomadic Aborigines in and around the Kimberley ceased their traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyles long ago, in order to live on pastoral stations, missions, and government settlements. When they first settled on pastoral stations, the Aborigines generally lived in humpies constructed from discarded material around the station buildings. They reached informal agreements with the station owners and managers, whereby they were provided with food, clothing, and minimal wages in exchange for their work in stock camps and around the station homestead. The men enjoyed, and took pride in, their skills as stockmen, while the women worked as domestic servants, gardeners, etc. During the wet season they would go walkabout to gather traditional foods, conduct ceremonies, visit sacred sites, etc. This system represented an accommodation between the needs of the pastoralists on one hand and the Aborigines on the other. However, it was essentially a feudal system that could not be allowed to continue, and it came to an end with the enactment of equal-wages legislation in 1965 and its implementation in 1968. As a result of this change most Aborigines in the Kimberley area were displaced from the stations into neighboring towns, including Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek, Derby, and Broome.

The present situation for many Aborigines in those towns can only be described as dismal, with high unemployment and serious problems involving alcohol, drugs, and physical abuse. However, the situation for these people can be expected to improve. Opportunities exist for some to apply their natural talents as artists, with considerable success, and for others to be employed in mining and tourism. Measures have been taken to diminish alcohol abuse, and it is pleasing that several Aboriginal-owned pastoral properties and other Kimberley enterprises have proved to be successful.