

# 9 • Icons of Country: Topographic Representations in Classical Aboriginal Traditions

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## INTRODUCTION

After more than two hundred years of colonial and post-colonial influence from a predominantly Anglo-Celtic culture, Australian Aboriginal people have retained their cultural identity as a group, comprising a large set of sub-groups, across the Australian continent (fig. 9.1). At this time they are a small minority of between 2 and 3 percent in a nation of eighteen million people. In most regions their ancient cultural traditions have been partly or heavily modified by a combination of forces, including an early phase of scattered violent conflicts with colonizers, depopulation owing mainly to disease, compulsory school education and institutionalization, and alcohol abuse.

In the more fertile areas of eastern and southwestern Australia, many aspects of these classical cultural traditions have been seriously expunged. But especially in the remoter regions of the north and center of the continent, Aboriginal people continue to practice significant repertoires of visual, musical, and ceremonial representations that are rooted in a more or less continuous cultural past stretching back at least sixty thousand years and possibly longer. A pervasive theme of those representations is the local cultural landscapes known to those who make them.

In the 1990s, Aboriginal youths are still being initiated in ancient ceremonies held at dozens of points across a broad band some hundreds of kilometers wide, from the southern coast on the Great Australian Bight to the northern coasts of the Northern Territory and Western Australia. By contrast, the last such ceremonies performed in the areas of densest non-Aboriginal settlement, in the urbanized regions of Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane, were well back in the nineteenth century. In urban centers young Aborigines may be found learning neotraditional dances, words from extinct local languages, and accounts of regional mythology, which their parents and grandparents in many cases may never have known, as part of a widespread movement of cultural revitalization. The term “Aboriginal culture” may thus cover a huge range, making generalizations dangerous. Aboriginal people of all the different regions continue to identify with the con-

tent of their classical tradition, however, even where little of it may be known to them through firsthand experience.<sup>1</sup> Indigenous Australian traditions are no more fixed or static than others, but they have been subject to greatly accelerated changes in the colonial and postcolonial period of the past two centuries. For this reason it is useful to distinguish classical traditions from postclassical traditions within contemporary Aboriginal culture.

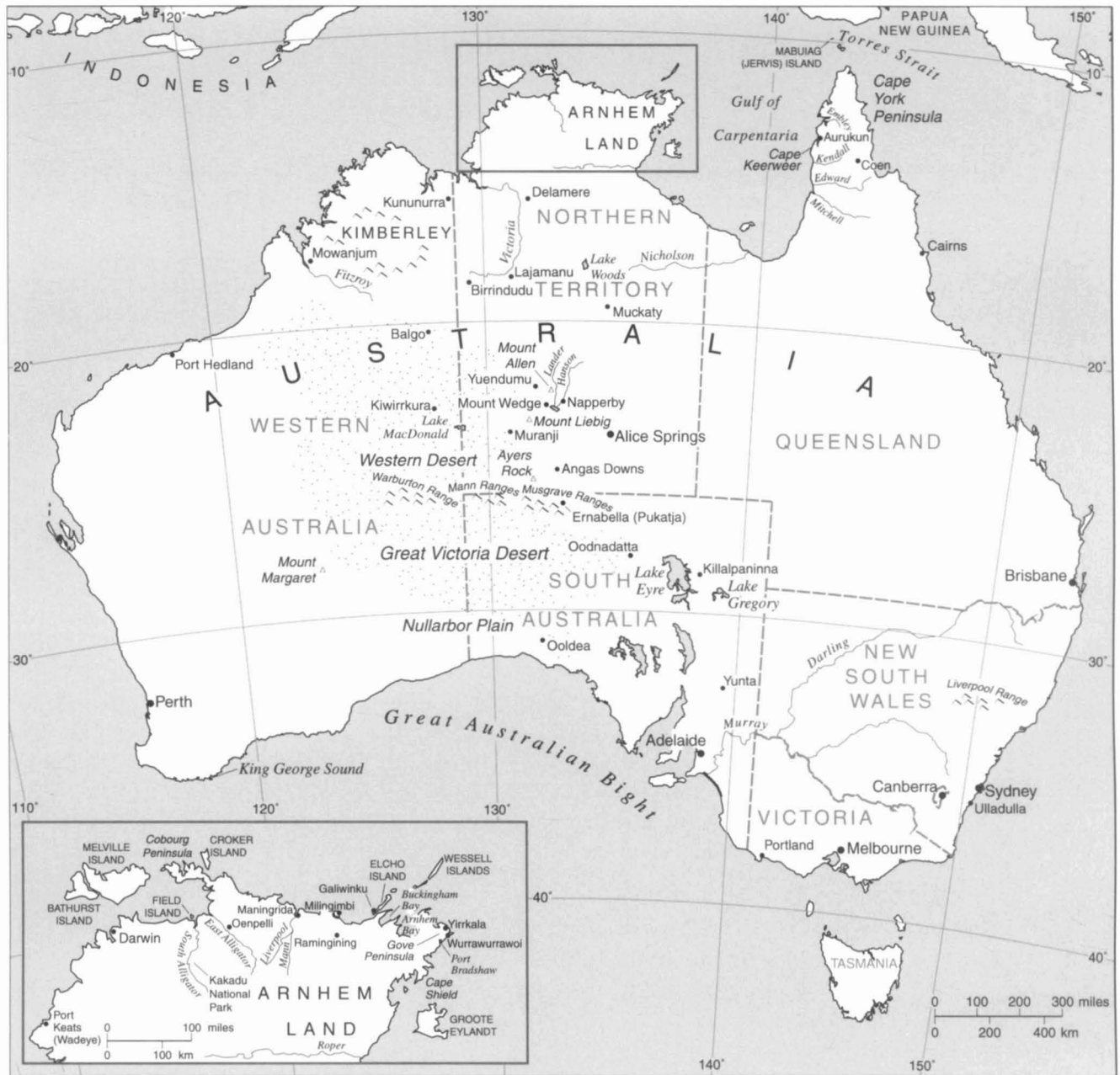
Classical traditions are those that were practiced at the time the first permanently dwelling non-Aborigines arrived in Australia,<sup>2</sup> and many of them have persisted among certain groups. Postclassical traditions depart significantly from those of the ancient past. The most widely known and internationally acclaimed of the classical traditions is usually subsumed, in English, under the phrase “Aboriginal art.” For this category of representations

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1. In this chapter I concentrate for the most part on mainland indigenous Australia and therefore on Aboriginal works. The people of the Torres Strait in Queensland, while indigenous Australians also, come from a Melanesian cultural stock and are far fewer than Aborigines; they are mentioned below, p. 399. Most of the indigenous works of the type I discuss here have been made by Aborigines rather than by Torres Strait Islanders.

2. The influence of European (and in some regions Chinese) colonizers began in the Sydney area in 1788 but did not immediately reach to all parts of the continent. The more arid interior and tropical north of Australia remained lightly explored and largely uncolonized for the first century of British occupation. Seminomadic Aboriginal groups came into contact with the newcomers in a piecemeal and often highly personalized way rather than through mass warfare, even though much of the early phase of such contact was marked by violence, including massacres (mainly of Aborigines). The last Aborigines to abandon a wholly foraging economy and become relatively permanently settled were those of the Western Desert region, the most recent arrivals from that desert being a small group that settled at Kiwirrkura in eastern Western Australia in 1984.



there is now a voluminous literature.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps most visual works that typically fall under this heading in the literature have as their subject matter the cultural landscapes locally significant to the artists who produce them. These are representations not only of known physiographic features at specific sites and the spatial relationships that hold between them, but also of the religious, proprietary, political, and other meanings attached to them. Indeed, it is the latter, not the former, that constitute the foreground of the works' significance for those who make them, although the two are intimately integrated.

One reason for distinguishing a "classical" phase of culture in this case is the necessity to recognize the difference between recent, sometimes rather abrupt, cultural transformations and the great continuities that preceded them. The archaeological evidence suggests clearly that precolonial indigenous cultures in Australia enjoyed a very long and comparatively stable period.<sup>4</sup> The impact of the events of the past two hundred years has dramatically wiped out classical traditions in many areas, while in others they survive more or less intact amid other practices that evince rapid social and cultural change. This chapter focuses on Aboriginal representations of place that lie more or less securely within the iconographic systems and cultural purposes of classical types. The next chapter, "Aboriginal Maps and Plans," focuses on topographic representations, mainly of recent provenance, whose iconographic systems and cultural purposes constitute a significant departure from past practices.

### THE RANGE OF ARTIFACTS

A wide range of media were, and in some regions still are, used by indigenous Australians in representing sites and landscapes and their totemic and mythic figures.<sup>5</sup> For many examples of such media all that has survived in the record is their outward form or a general description suggesting they had sacred significance. It is a solid assumption, but an assumption nevertheless, that by and large the symbolisms of such poorly documented past works were frequently, perhaps predominantly, focused on land-based themes such as site-specific totemic beings and traveling Dreaming narratives.

#### PRECOLONIAL AND EARLY COLONIAL WORKS

Into this category fall most of the parietal art (rock paintings and engravings) and stone arrangements that are widespread across the Australian continent, as well as the more ephemeral southeast Australian ceremonial earth sculptures.<sup>6</sup> Here also belong the decorated tumuli sighted by the early colonizers of New South Wales and other constructions such as the elaborately geometric

sand and vegetation "monument" François Péron saw in southwestern Australia in 1801.<sup>7</sup> Into this category would fall as well the bark paintings or drawings sighted in Tasmania in the first years of the nineteenth century, in Victoria in 1861, and in New South Wales in 1839–44.<sup>8</sup>

The older Australian museums hold large numbers of

3. For general works see, for example, Ronald Murray Berndt and Catherine Helen Berndt with John E. Stanton, *Aboriginal Australian Art: A Visual Perspective* (Sydney: Methuen, 1982); Peter Sutton, ed., *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia* (New York: George Braziller in association with the Asia Society Galleries, 1988); Wally Caruana, *Aboriginal Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993); Judith Ryan, *Spirit in Land: Bark Paintings from Arnhem Land in the National Gallery of Victoria* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, [1990]); and idem, *Paint up Big: Warlpiri Women's Art of Lajamanu* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, [1990]). The major scholarly studies of living Aboriginal iconographic traditions are by anthropologists Nancy D. Munn, *Walbiri Iconography: Graphic Representation and Cultural Symbolism in a Central Australian Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973; reprinted with new afterword, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Howard Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); and Luke Taylor, *Seeing the Inside: Bark Painting in Western Arnhem Land* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

4. This is not to say that Australia was free of external cultural influences before the British invasion commencing in 1788. Melanesian cultural influence on Cape York Peninsula, and that of peoples of the Indonesian archipelago on coastal Aborigines across the rest of north Australia, is well documented; see Josephine Flood, *Archaeology of the Dreamtime* (Sydney: Collins, 1983), 220–25, and Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). On the other hand, stone technology remained basically the same right through the Pleistocene period of occupation; a significant variation occurred in the past five thousand years, with the emergence of the small stone tool tradition, as well as what appears to have been a general population increase, the introduction of the dog, and so on. See J. Peter White and James F. O'Connell, *A Prehistory of Australia, New Guinea and Sahul* (Sydney: Academic Press, 1982), 102–5.

5. Totemic figures are entities that stand in an emblematic relation to structured groups such as clans and moieties, or sometimes to individuals. They may or may not be associated with mythology or sacred sites. There is a vast anthropological literature on Aboriginal totemism. The best introduction to the topic remains W. E. H. Stanner, "Religion, Totemism and Symbolism," in *Aboriginal Man in Australia: Essays in Honour of Emeritus Professor A. P. Elkin*, ed. Ronald Murray Berndt and Catherine Helen Berndt (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1965), 207–37.

6. Ronald Murray Berndt, *Australian Aboriginal Religion*, 4 fascs. (Leiden: Brill, 1974), esp. fasc. 1, pp. 27–31, and plates.

7. E. L. Ruhe, "Poetry in the Older Australian Landscape," in *Mapped but Not Known: The Australian Landscape of the Imagination*, ed. P. R. Eaden and F. H. Mares (Netley, South Australia: Wakefield Press, 1986), 20–49, esp. 29–44, and François Péron, *A Voyage of Discovery to the Southern Hemisphere, Performed by Order of the Emperor Napoleon, during the Years 1801, 1802, 1803, and 1804* (London: R. Phillips, 1809), 62–63.

8. Péron, *Voyage of Discovery*, 212; R. Brough Smyth, comp., *The Aborigines of Victoria*, 2 vols. (Melbourne: J. Ferres, Government Printer, 1878), 1:292; and Mrs. Charles Meredith, *Notes and Sketches of New South Wales, during a Residence in That Colony from 1839 to 1844* (London: Murray, 1844), 91–92.

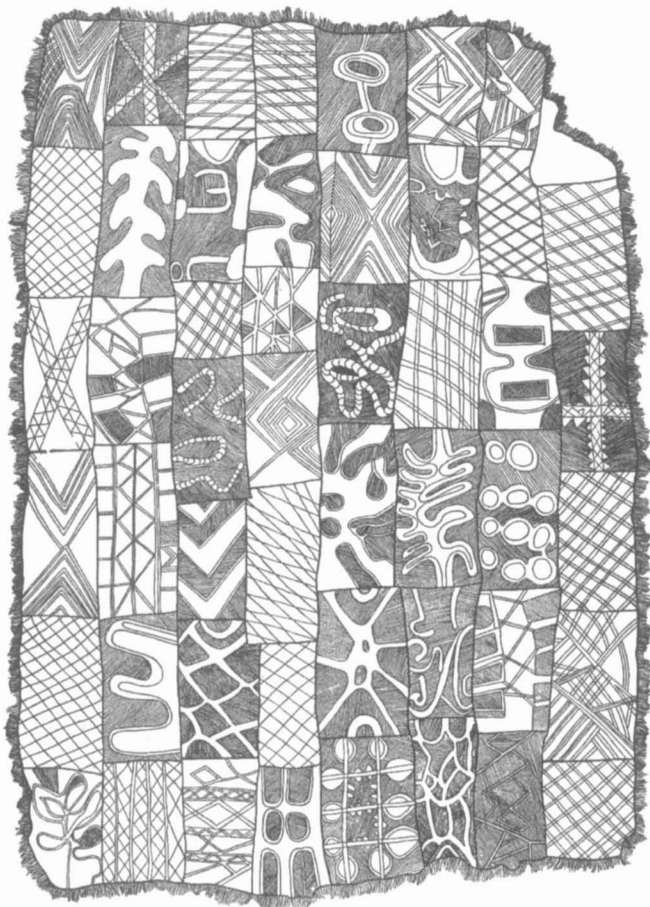


FIG. 9.2. DRAWING OF AN ABORIGINAL SKIN RUG FROM CONDAH, VICTORIA, CA. 1872. From southeastern Australia north of Portland, the original rug is made of opossum skins sewn with kangaroo tail sinews and incised. See Charles Percy Mountford, "Decorated Aboriginal Skin Rugs," *Records of the South Australian Museum* 13 (1960): 505–8. Size of the original: 176 × 123 cm. Photograph courtesy of the Museum of Victoria Council, Melbourne.

geometrically (sometimes figuratively) decorated weapons such as clubs, shields, and spear-throwers, and utensils such as digging sticks and bowls, also from the southeastern part of Australia. Although we know that people in the region linked specific geometric patterns with particular groups, and it is possible that these designs were totemic or territorial in reference, no adequate accounts of their meanings have come down to us.<sup>9</sup> Similar poorly documented types of work include the richly varied geometrically incised trees of New South Wales, a highly decorated skin rug in a similar tradition from Victoria (fig. 9.2), the often engraved cylindroconical stones of the Darling River region, carved sacred objects (including bull-roarers) in southeastern Australia, the animal and human figures made of clay and grass used in ceremonies in southeastern Queensland, similar figures carved in

wood in the southwest and in wood or painted bark in the southeast of Australia, and probably even a "stuffed emu" used in an initiation ceremony in New South Wales.<sup>10</sup>

Also largely undocumented but likely to have been part of a land-based religious iconographic tradition were constructions such as the bower containing sacred objects that William Westall saw and painted in 1812 on the shore of the Gulf of Carpentaria, the trees "fantastically crowned at the summit" that John Oxley saw in 1824 at a ceremony ground in southeastern Queensland, and the inverted trees topped with patterned bark lacework that Tom Petrie saw at an initiation ceremony in the same region some years afterward.<sup>11</sup>

Of these works, which were generally found in the now heavily settled parts of the continent, much parietal art and some stone arrangements remain in situ (fig. 9.3),<sup>12</sup>

9. Carol Cooper, "Traditional Visual Culture in South-east Australia," in *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century*, by Andrew Sayers (Melbourne: Oxford University Press in association with the National Gallery of Australia, 1994), 91–109, esp. 107–8, and Peter Sutton, Philip Jones, and Steven Hemming, "Survival, Regeneration, and Impact," in *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Peter Sutton (New York: George Braziller in association with the Asia Society Galleries, 1988), 180–212, esp. 185–86.

10. On the incised trees, see Robert Etheridge, *The Dendroglyphs, or "Carved Trees" of New South Wales* (Sydney: W. A. Gullick, 1918), and David Bell, *Aboriginal Carved Trees of Southeastern Australia: A Research Report* (Sydney: National Parks and Wildlife Service, 1982). On rugs (or cloaks) and the engraved cylindroconical stones, see Carol Cooper, "Art of Temperate Southeast Australia," in *Aboriginal Australia*, by Carol Cooper et al. (Sydney: Australian Gallery Directors Council, 1981), 29–40, esp. 34–35, 39–40, and illustrations on 118–20. On carved sacred objects, see W. J. Enright, "Notes on the Aborigines of the North Coast of New South Wales," *Mankind* 2 (1936–40): 88–91, and A. W. Howitt, *The Native Tribes of South-east Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1904), 509–710 passim, and on bull-roarers, see also note 27 below. On the clay and grass figures, see Constance Campbell Petrie, *Tom Petrie's Reminiscences of Early Queensland* (Brisbane: Watson, Ferguson, 1904), 49. On the similar carved wood figures, see Daisy Bates, *The Native Tribes of Western Australia*, ed. Isobel White (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1985), 329–30. On the painted wood or bark figures, see W. Scott, "Notes on Australian Aborigines," MS. A2376, Mitchell Library, Sydney, ca. 1871–1928, and also Cooper, "Traditional Visual Culture," 96–97 and references. On the stuffed emu, see A. C. McDonald, "The Aborigines of the Page and Isis," *Journal of the Anthropological Institute* 7 (1878): 235–58.

11. On the bower, see Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, 2d ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 196–97 and pl. 21. On the fantastically crowned trees, see R. H. Cambage and Henry Selkirk, "Early Drawings of an Aboriginal Ceremonial Ground," *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales* 54 (1920): 74–78, esp. 76. On the inverted trees, see Petrie, *Tom Petrie's Reminiscences*, 49.

12. F. D. McCarthy, *Rock Art of the Cobar Pediplain in Central Western New South Wales* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1976); R. G. Gunn, *Aboriginal Rock Art in the Grampians*, ed. P. J. F. Coutts (Melbourne: Victoria Archaeological Survey, 1983); Charles Percy Mountford, "Cave Paintings in the Mount Lofty Ranges,

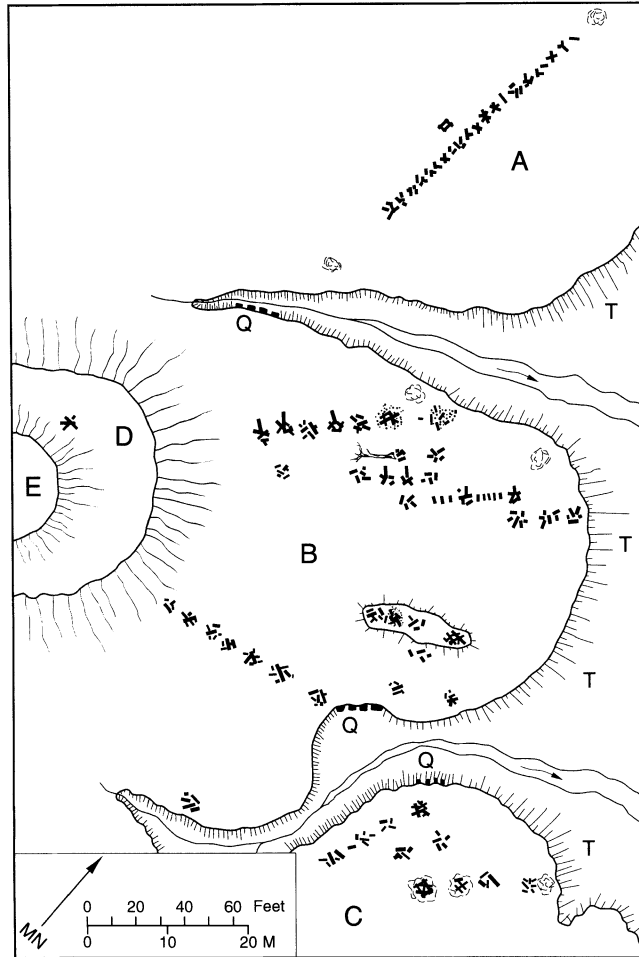


FIG. 9.3. SKETCH PLAN OF ABORIGINAL STONE ARRANGEMENTS, GREAT VICTORIA DESERT. The site in south-central Australia shown in this map is a low terrace divided by two small watercourses or gutters. The resulting three divisions (A, B, and C) are where the stone arrangements made of limestone slabs occur. In the upper part of both watercourses are limestone exposures that were quarried (Q) for the limestone slabs in the stone piles. To the west of section B are two small, higher semicircular shelves (D and E; ca. 1.5 and 1.2 m). A talus slope (T) about two meters high includes broken blocks of similar shape but much smaller than those described above.

After T. D. Campbell and P. S. Hossfeld, "Australian Aboriginal Stone Arrangements in North-west South Australia," *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia* 90 (1966): 171–78, esp. 172 (fig. 1).

and a bark drawing, a bark effigy, an incised skin cloak, some sacred objects, many incised weapons and utensils, and many cylindroconical stones survive in museum collections.<sup>13</sup> But the general picture for the earlier and more heavily colonized regions of Australia is one of loss, both of the objects themselves and even more thoroughly of their meanings.

#### THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Where similar kinds of works have continued to be made in remoter and more recently colonized parts of the country and during the period when professional anthropologists have been carrying out research among indigenous Australians, careful documentation has frequently shown intimate and detailed relations between such designs and local religious geography. Under classical conditions, and in noncommercial ceremonial contexts of the present day, the "audiences" for such works are correspondingly very localized and drawn from small populations, perhaps a few hundred at the most. Those who make images of country in such circumstances are recruited from small, local groups rather than based on any panregional reputation for excellence. Indeed, there is no category of specialized "mapmaker," any more than there is one of "artist" in the classical traditions of Aboriginal Australians, although the term "artist" and its associated role have come into common usage in this century, particularly now that a flood of painted and carved works has reached museums and art markets since the 1950s. By far the majority of extant Aboriginal works in the classical mode were made in the twentieth century. The major exceptions consist largely of fixed rock art and sacred stone slabs from Central Australia. Very few mobile works, apart from weapons and utensils, are older, although a small number of bark paintings and drawings have survived from the late nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> The oldest works usually lack documentation and are thus not open to specific interpretations, such as those identifying the parts of the images that refer to particular topographical features.

In the case of Australian rock art, some studies have been carried out with living painters of rock surfaces, but there are also several studies where living Aborigines have worked with anthropologists to pass on their understanding of the engravings and paintings made by their predecessors (fig. 9.4). Such attempts at contemporary interpretation include the work of Hale and Tindale and of Trezise in Cape York Peninsula, Tindale's work in the Port Hedland area of Western Australia, Lewis and Rose's in the Victoria River region, Chaloupka's and Taçon's in

South Australia," *Records of the South Australian Museum* 13 (1957–60): 467–70 and pl. LI; and T. D. Campbell and Charles Percy Mountford, "Aboriginal Arrangements of Stones in Central Australia," *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia* 63 (1939): 17–21.

13. See Cooper, "Traditional Visual Culture" (note 9), and Cooper, "Art of Temperate Southeast Australia" (note 10).

14. See Philip Jones, "Perceptions of Aboriginal Art: A History," in *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Peter Sutton (New York: George Braziller in association with the Asia Society Galleries, 1988), 143–79, and Andrew Sayers, *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press in association with the National Gallery of Australia, 1994).

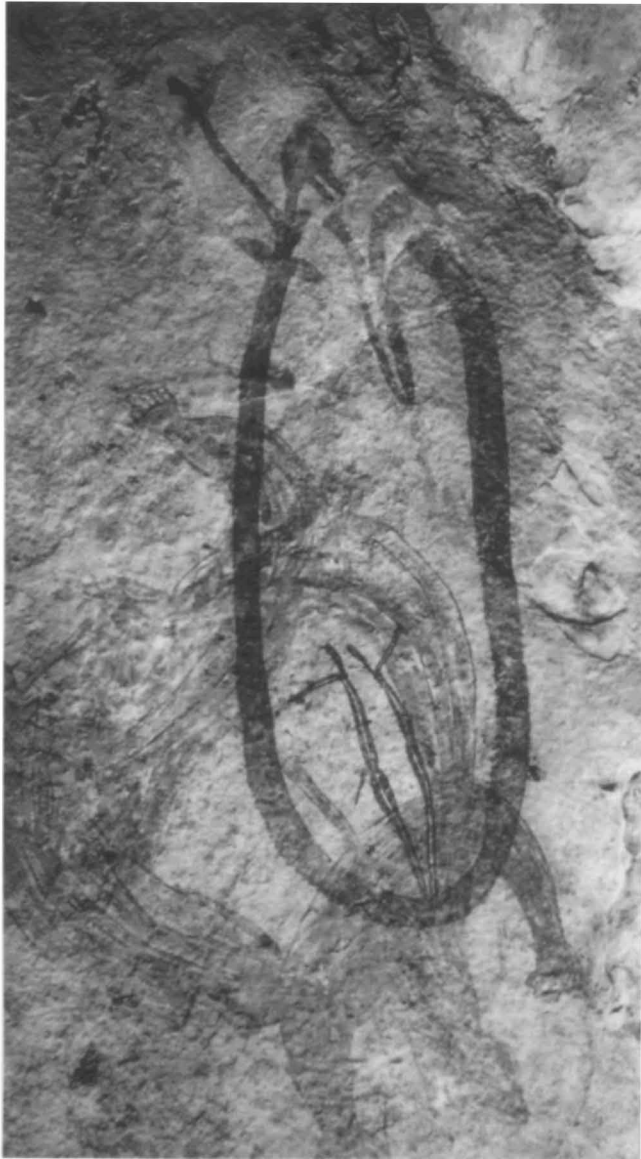


FIG. 9.4. EARLY ROCK ART REPRESENTATION OF AL-MUDJ. Superimposed on a turtle, this figure is identified as Al-mudj, the Rainbow Snake, a mythic figure of the Deaf Adder Creek area, in a state of metamorphosis from its human female form. Ochres on the ceiling of a low overhang in the Djuwen site complex in Kakadu National Park, western Arnhem Land. Size of the original: 111 × 37 cm (snake). Photograph by George Chaloupka, courtesy of the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin (reg. no. 09/MAY87M). By permission of Warlayirti Artists Association, Balgo Hills.

western Arnhem Land, and Layton's studies in the Kimberleys, Central Australia, and Cape York Peninsula.<sup>15</sup> How such contemporary interpretations might themselves be understood by scholars is itself, however, a very complex matter, as Merlan has pointed out in her account of participation in a rock art recording exercise in the Delamere region of the north-central Northern Territory.<sup>16</sup>

As a general rule, where rock paintings or engravings are identified with mythic beings, they are the beings peculiar to the area—and often the very site—where the rock art itself is situated. Images of this kind may be described as self-referential, illustrating a site-specific being and events that occurred at the mythological site itself. Sometimes there are designs indicating routes to related sites in the same locality. Ancient images of this type are frequently regarded as the work of the ancestral beings themselves rather than as those of humans.

In central and northeast Arnhem Land, studies have shown the way sand sculptures used in mortuary ceremonies represent important sites and totemic beings connected with the landowning groups of the deceased (fig. 9.5). Similar sculptures are used in regional cult ceremonies in the same region.<sup>17</sup> The impressive painted carvings and suspended installations of the Aurukun area of Cape York Peninsula have also been shown to have highly specific topographical and narrative reference.<sup>18</sup> Painted shields, ceremonial paddles, boomerangs, and spear-throwers from the Cairns rain forest region of Queensland bore totemic designs connoting specific localities and their people.<sup>19</sup> Wooden carvings from Arnhem Land include those that represent ancestral beings whose

15. Herbert M. Hale and Norman B. Tindale, "Aborigines of Princess Charlotte Bay, North Queensland," *Records of the South Australian Museum* 5 (1933–36): 63–172; P. J. Trezise, *Rock Art of South-east Cape York* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1971); Norman B. Tindale, "Kariara Views on Some Rock Engravings at Port Hedland, Western Australia," *Records of the South Australian Museum* 21 (1987): 43–59; D. Lewis and Deborah Bird Rose, *The Shape of the Dreaming: The Cultural Significance of Victoria River Rock Art* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988); George Chaloupka, *Journey in Time: The World's Longest Continuing Art Tradition* (Chatswood: Reed, 1993); Paul S. C. Taçon, "Contemporary Aboriginal Interpretations of Western Arnhem Land Rock Paintings," in *The Inspired Dream: Life as Art in Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Margie K. C. West (South Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1988), 20–25; and Robert Layton, *Australian Rock Art: A New Synthesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

16. Francesca Merlan, "The Interpretive Framework of Wardaman Rock Art: A Preliminary Report," *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 1989, no. 2, 14–24. See also the papers in M. J. Morwood and D. R. Hobbs, eds., *Rock Art and Ethnography: Proceedings of the Ethnography Symposium (H)*, *Australian Rock Art Research Association Congress, Darwin, 1988* (Melbourne: Australian Rock Art Research Association, 1992).

17. Margaret Clunies Ross and L. R. Hiatt, "Sand Sculptures at a Gidjingali Burial Rite," and Ian Keen, "Yolngu Sand Sculptures in Context," both in *Form in Indigenous Art: Schematisation in the Art of Aboriginal Australia and Prehistoric Europe*, ed. Peter J. Ucko (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1977), 131–46 and 165–83.

18. Peter Sutton, "Dreamings," in *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Peter Sutton (New York: George Braziller in association with the Asia Society Galleries, 1988), 13–32, esp. 23–29.

19. Ursula H. McConnel, "Inspiration and Design in Aboriginal Art," *Art in Australia* 59 (1935): 49–68; idem, "Native Arts and Industries on the Archer, Kendall and Holroyd Rivers, Cape York Penin-



FIG. 9.5. SAND SCULPTURE, NORTHEAST ARNHEM LAND, 1976. Gupapuyngu clan members, including singers, sit at the sand sculpture. The sculpture is part of mortuary ceremonies and represents the water holes and tracts asso-

ciated with the sacred being Nowa at Djilwirri, Buckingham Bay. By permission of Ian Keen.

travels between specific places are implicated, sometimes indicated, by the form of painted decorations on the object.<sup>20</sup> Similar reference to specific country occurs in decorations on dancing poles, memorial posts, and log bone receptacles in the same region.<sup>21</sup>

The monumental carved grave-posts of Bathurst and

sula, North Queensland," *Records of the South Australian Museum* 11 (1953–55): 1–42, esp. 36–39; and Norman B. Tindale, Collection Object Documentation, Cairns Rainforest Shields, South Australian Museum, Adelaide, 1938.

20. See examples in Karel Kupka, *Dawn of Art: Painting and Sculpture of Australian Aborigines* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1965), 145–78; idem, *Peintres aborigènes d'Australie* (Paris: Musée de l'Homme, 1972); Louis A. Allen, *Time before Morning: Art and Myth of the Australian Aborigines* (New York: Crowell, 1975); Berndt, Berndt, and Stanton, *Aboriginal Australian Art* (note 3); Peter Cooke and Jon Altman, eds., *Aboriginal Art at the Top: A Regional Exhibition* (Maningrida: Maningrida Arts and Crafts, 1982); John E. Stanton, *Im-*

Melville Islands may have "sculptured elements [that] have specific meanings according to the 'story' chosen for that [carving] commission, the territorial and family affiliations of the dead person, and the relationship and totemic connections of the artist."<sup>22</sup> The "portable scenery" of ceremonial performers in the Mowanjum area of

*ages of Aboriginal Australia*, exhibition catalog (Nedlands: University of Western Australia, Anthropology Research Museum, 1988); Michael A. O'Ferrall, *Keepers of the Secrets: Aboriginal Art from Arnhemland in the Collection of the Art Gallery of Western Australia* (Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1990).

21. Examples can be found in Berndt, Berndt, and Stanton, *Aboriginal Australian Art*, and Margie K. C. West, ed., *The Inspired Dream: Life as Art in Aboriginal Australia* (South Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1988).

22. Jennifer Hoff, *Tiwi Graveposts* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1988), 5, and see also Charles Percy Mountford, *The Tiwi: Their Art, Myth and Ceremony* (London: Phoenix House, 1958),

Western Australia, consisting of wood, tin, and string constructions depicting mythic themes of certain geographic areas, are among the most spectacular items of paraphernalia to have evolved in Aboriginal tradition.<sup>23</sup> The toas or waymarkers of the Lake Eyre region of south-central Australia, discussed in more detail later in this chapter, contain complex topographical representations in the form of the sculptures themselves, the designs painted on them, and the objects attached to them.<sup>24</sup>

The best documented and most thoroughly analyzed of the relevant iconographic traditions and their cultural complexities, however, are those of the bark paintings of Arnhem Land and the ground designs and acrylic paintings on canvas or linen from the Western Desert region of Central Australia.<sup>25</sup> These are also dealt with in some detail below.

Secret-sacred objects form a major class of Aboriginal artifacts that carry topographic representations. Because of the restrictions placed on them by Aboriginal law, they cannot be illustrated here. They include the sacred clan emblems or *rangga* of northeast Arnhem Land, and in the same region the massive Kunapipi ceremonial poles up to eight meters tall.<sup>26</sup> In Central Australia and the Western Desert, ovate slabs of stone or wood, usually incised with geometric representations of ancestral beings, sacred sites, and mythic events, some of them also functioning as bull-roarers, form a major class of such objects.<sup>27</sup> The early ethnographies for such objects, even where detailed, present little analysis of the iconographic systems involved.<sup>28</sup> Taylor has produced a sophisticated analysis of Pitjantjatjara sacred objects and crayon drawings that builds on the work of Munn.<sup>29</sup> Large collections of these objects were made during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by museums and private collectors, and in 1995 substantial collections continued to be held at such institutions as the South Australian Museum in Adelaide, the Museum of Victoria in Melbourne, the Strehlow Research Centre in Alice Springs, Panorama Guth (a private commercial museum) in Alice Springs, and at other museums in Australia, Europe, and North America.<sup>30</sup> A continuing program of returning such objects to those with traceable customary property rights in them was formalized at the South Australian Museum in 1985.<sup>31</sup>

Secret-sacred artifacts bearing references to topographically focused mythology also include ceremonial paraphernalia frequently fixed to the bodies of ritual performers or carried by them—the boundary between ritual apparel and sculpture is thus often blurred. Such constructions, usually consisting of a wooden base or frame to which hair string, twine, feathers, molded wax or gypsum, and a wide variety of other objects may be attached, are among the most spectacular of Aboriginal religious artifacts. In Central Australia the most notable of these

are the *waninga* (or *wanigi*) string crosses and decorated *inatantja* (or *nurtunja*) poles, objects that are of astonishing beauty and variety but are largely kept from public view for reasons of religious secrecy.<sup>32</sup>

esp. 107–21, and Margie K. C. West, *Declan: A Tiwi Artist* (Perth: Australian City Properties, 1987), esp. 17–19 and 28–29.

23. Elphine Allen, “Australian Aboriginal Dance,” in *The Australian Aboriginal Heritage: An Introduction through the Arts*, ed. Ronald Murray Berndt and E. S. Phillips (Sydney: Australian Society for Education through the Arts in association with Ure Smith, 1973), 275–90, esp. 277.

24. Philip Jones and Peter Sutton, *Art and Land: Aboriginal Sculptures of the Lake Eyre Region* (Adelaide: South Australian Museum, 1986).

25. On the bark paintings, see Morphy, *Ancestral Connections*, and Taylor, *Seeing the Inside* (both note 3). On the ground designs and acrylic paintings see Munn, *Walbiri Iconography* (note 3), and Christopher Anderson and Françoise Dussart, “Dreamings in Acrylic: Western Desert Art,” in *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Peter Sutton (New York: George Braziller in association with the Asia Society Galleries, 1988), 89–142.

26. On the *rangga*, see W. Lloyd Warner, *A Black Civilization: A Social Study of an Australian Tribe*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper, 1958), esp. 39–51, and on the ceremonial poles, see Ronald Murray Berndt and Catherine Helen Berndt, *The World of the First Australians*, 4th rev. ed. (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988), 436–38.

27. These objects have become widely known by the Arrernte [Aranda] term *tywerrenge*, earlier spelled *churinga*, *tjuringa* (see, for example, Helen M. Wallis and Arthur H. Robinson, eds., *Cartographical Innovations: An International Handbook of Mapping Terms to 1900* [Tring, Eng.: Map Collector Publications in association with the International Cartographic Association, 1987], 214 and fig. 19). Bull-roarers are wooden slabs, usually of a highly tapered oval shape, with lengths of string attached. Men hold the end of the string and swing the bull-roarer around their heads. As it circles them it also rotates, creating a roaring sound. This typically happens during moments in ceremonies when secret-sacred objects or designs are being revealed to novices or when men signal that women and children must not approach the ceremonial ground. The “voice” of the bull-roarer is often identified as that of a mythical or totemic entity.

28. See, for example, Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1899), esp. 128–66, and Charles Percy Mountford, “Sacred Objects of the Pitjandjara Tribe, Western Central Australia,” *Records of the South Australian Museum* 14 (1961–64): 397–411.

29. Luke Taylor, “Ancestors into Art: An Analysis of Pitjantjatjara Kulpidji Designs and Crayon Drawings” (B.A. honors thesis, Department of Prehistory and Anthropology, Australian National University, 1979); Nancy D. Munn, “The Spatial Presentation of Cosmic Order in Walbiri Iconography,” in *Primitive Art and Society*, ed. Anthony Forge (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 193–220; and idem, *Walbiri Iconography* (note 3).

30. For non-Australian collections, see Carol Cooper, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collections in Overseas Museums* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1989), and Gerhard Schlatter, *Bumerang und Schwirrholtz: Eine Einführung in die traditionelle Kultur australischer Aborigines* (Berlin: Reimer, 1985).

31. Christopher Anderson, “Australian Aborigines and Museums—A New Relationship,” *Curator* 33 (1990): 165–79.

32. Spencer and Gillen, *Native Tribes*, esp. 231–37, 306–15, 360–63, and 627 (note 28), and T. G. H. Strehlow, *Aranda Traditions* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1947), esp. 67–86.



## CONCEPTS

Classical Aboriginal topographic representations are essentially religious in content. They depict places and geographical features that have been selected and are shown together based on their occurrence in sacred myths. These myths are a central element in the body of Aboriginal tradition that is founded in the concept of the Dreaming (see below).

The people who make these topographic representations do not do so with cool detachment. In Aboriginal terms, all landscape is someone's home. "Land," "country," "camp," and "home" are encompassed by a single term in Aboriginal languages. The places represented in the works I am discussing here are usually the loci of intense religious, political, familial, and personal emotions.

Many of the myths are centrally concerned with spiritual identification between a set of sites and their people, thus encapsulating and asserting the customary-legal interests of particular human groups in particular areas of land. Customary rights to reproduce sacred topographical designs are frequently built on landownership rights and may be jealously guarded. At a certain crude level it is possible to say that those who own the sacred designs (and songs and dances) own the relevant land. Mythic-topographic designs may also symbolize relationships of alliance or disjunction between distinct land-based groups, especially in the case of far-traveling myths. Nevertheless, the myths and their more or less conventional picturings in both visual and performance modes do lead a life of their own to some extent, not always quite matching current land tenure or the current state of alliance politics.<sup>33</sup>

The paths along which Dreamings (ancestral beings) traveled are commonly known as Dreaming tracks, some passing through the countries of dozens of groups. Over much of Australia, particularly the inland regions, Dreamings typically fall into one of four categories, depending on their pattern of travel: stationary Dreamings that reside at one place and move about only at or near that site; estate-specific Dreamings that travel about from site to site within the local estate of a single low-level land-holding group or clan; regional travelers that pass through several adjacent estates in a certain district but begin and end within the social and ritual ken of their owning members; and continental travelers that pass through dozens of estates and journey for hundreds or thousands of kilometers, linking landowners who, at least until recent times and the advent of modern communications, did not know each other.

## THE DREAMING AND ABORIGINAL RELIGION

Anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner gave this account of the

efforts of an Aboriginal man to teach him the meaning of the concept usually referred to in English as the Dreaming, in its manifestation as a Dreaming place:

"My father . . . said this: 'My boy, look! Your Dreaming is there; it is a big thing; you never let it go [pass it by]; all Dreamings [totem entities] come from there; your spirit is there.'" Does the white man now understand? The blackfellow, earnest, friendly, makes a last effort. "Old man, you listen! Something is there; we do not know what; *something*." There is a struggle to find words, and perhaps a lapse into English. "Like engine, like power, plenty of power; it does hard-work; it *pushes*." (Perhaps now the anthropologist begins to understand. . . .)<sup>34</sup>

The foundational concept of the Dreaming, the organizing logic of so much of the symbolism of Aboriginal imagery, is not easily explained partly because it is unlike the foundational concepts of most other religious systems. The Dreaming is not an idealized past, for example, although it is sometimes represented as a "creative period," logically prior if not temporally previous. The Dreaming, and Dreaming beings, are not the products of human dreams. In most Aboriginal languages, though not all, the concepts referred to in English as Dreaming are not in fact referred to by Aboriginal words for dreams or the act of dreaming, even though it may be through dreams that one sometimes gets in touch with the Dreaming. The use of the English word "Dreaming" is more a matter of metaphor than of translation. The same applies to the use of terms based on the verb "to dream" to express the notion of the Dreaming in some Aboriginal languages.<sup>35</sup> The animate beings of the Dreaming, themselves Dreamings (ancestral beings), are not idealized persons. They exhibit all the faces of human virtue, vice, pleasure, and suffering. Images of these beings, their places of travel and habitation and their experiences, make up the greatest single source of Aboriginal imagery. Although most are characterized as the animals and plants of Australia (e.g., Kangaroo, Long Yam), or as heroic individuals (e.g., the Two Women, the Apelech Men), some are less readily grasped as totemic beings by outsiders—Cough Dreaming, for example, or Dead Body

33. Peter Sutton, "Mystery and Change," in *Songs of Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, Tamsin Donaldson, and Stephen A. Wild (Sydney: University of Sydney, 1987), 77–96.

34. Stanner, "Religion, Totemism and Symbolism," 231 (note 5); brackets and italic in original.

35. For a critique of the use of the notion of "Dreaming" by non-Aborigines, see Patrick Wolfe, "On Being Woken Up: The Dreamtime in Anthropology and in Australian Settler Culture," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 33 (1991): 197–224. John Morton has written a rejoinder to Wolfe's position, "Essentially Australian, Essentially Black: Australian Anthropology and Its Uses of Aboriginal Identity" (forthcoming).

or Diarrhea. Dreamings clearly are not just things that are good to eat. As totemic beings they are rather, as Claude Lévi-Strauss has put it, “good to think [with].”<sup>36</sup>

In classical Aboriginal thought, there is no powerful, culturally central dichotomy of the spiritual and material, the sacred and secular, or the natural and supernatural. While the Dreaming beings and their physical counterparts and manifestations (as species, water holes, rock formations, or people) are each distinguished, Dreamings and their visible transformations are also, at a certain level, one.

The centrality of place, particular lands and sites of significance in Aboriginal topographic imagery, enables even the religious sculptures to be regarded as landscapes. For the traditionally minded, paintings, engravings, and sculptures themselves may belong on a continuum of manifestations of the Dreaming, together with those who made them, the natural entities projected in the designs, and the topographic features represented. Landscape features themselves are the marks of the Dreamings, elements of a larger meaning system.

Over much of Australia, Dreaming sites are connected not only in myth but by sequences of verses in long song series. These songs are typically those performed in religious ceremonies. The landscape is thus crisscrossed with what have been called songlines.

#### SONGLINES

Bruce Chatwin’s best-selling popularization *The Songlines* has created an international recognition of the distinctive relationship between traditional Aboriginal songs and the mythic pathways that connect places over vast distances in Australia.<sup>37</sup> Much of the Australian continent is, or used to be, overlain by such pathways or Dreaming tracks.<sup>38</sup> Although not all such lines have songs associated with them, many do.

Paintings and sculptures that depict sites along these mythological tracks, including those that are also songlines, are thus not so much “topographic representations” of whole areas as selective depictions of trackways across them. A map of Dreaming tracks constructed by an ethnologist will normally show a matrix of natural features on which Dreaming sites and their linkages are superimposed. Aboriginal images dealing with the same tracks and songlines tend mainly to show only the linked sites, and to arrange them into a basically symmetrical pattern (fig. 9.6).

There are regions of Australia where the mythological travels of Dreaming beings play a far less structurally important role in land tenure than they do, most notably, in inland and north-central Australia. In Cape York Peninsula, although such travels are recounted in narratives, songs, and performances, the cultural emphasis is not so

much on these connections between sites as on the sites themselves. The whole approach is far more atomistic and less network oriented than in the arid hinterland, for example.

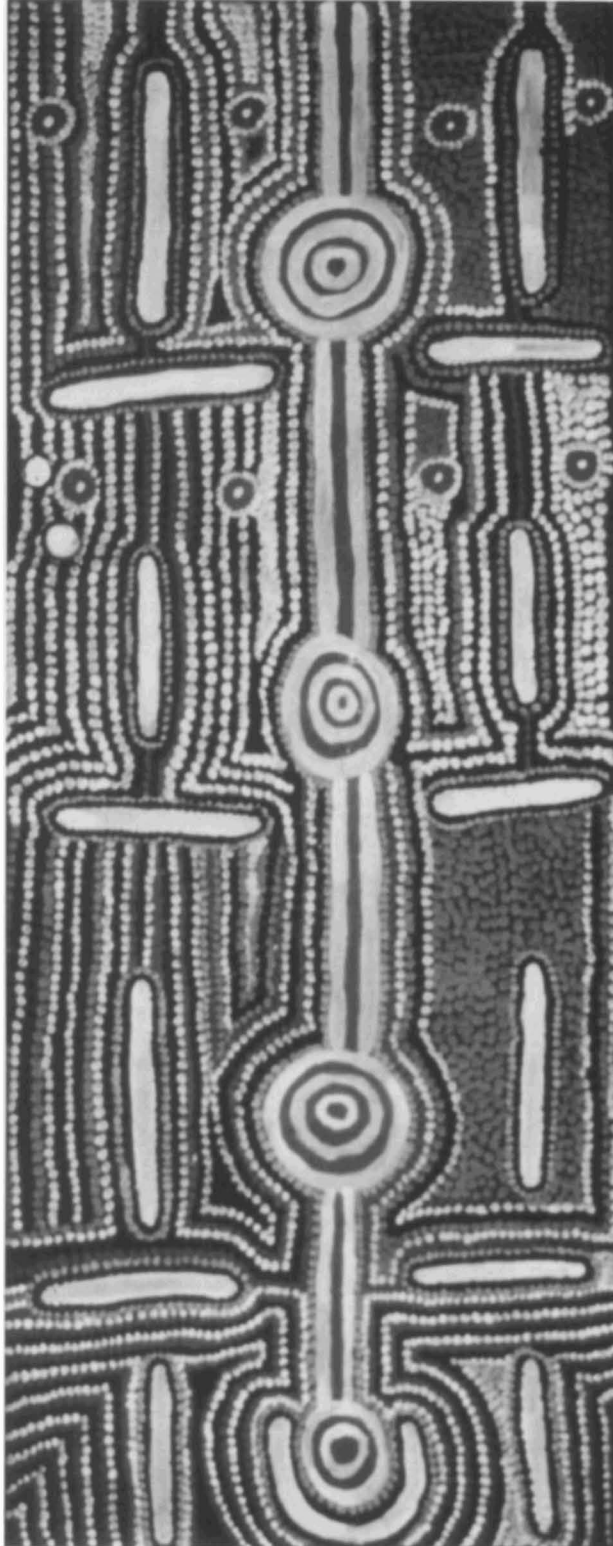
#### SPATIAL CATEGORIES

It is usually possible to identify the spatial scope of an Aboriginal image, even where it is poorly documented. The spatial scope can usually be included in one of four spatial-cultural categories: (1) a specific tract of country, often one defined by specific episodes of mythic narrative; (2) a broad regional political geography; (3) a cosmological category, such as the earth and sky; or (4) a plan of a residential site and its houses or shelters, or a plan of a vessel, and their contents.

36. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, trans. Rodney Needham (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1969), 162.

37. For authoritative and sophisticated accounts of such songlines, see, e.g., T. G. H. Strehlow, “Geography and the Totemic Landscape in Central Australia: A Functional Study,” in *Australian Aboriginal Anthropology: Modern Studies in the Social Anthropology of the Australian Aborigines*, ed. Ronald Murray Berndt (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1970), 92–140; idem, *Songs of Central Australia* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1971); Richard M. Moyle with Slippery Morton, *Alyawarra Music: Songs and Society in a Central Australian Community* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1986); and Francesca Merlan, “Catfish and Alligator: Totemic Songs of the Western Roper River, Northern Territory,” in *Songs of Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, Tamsin Donaldson, and Stephen A. Wild (Sydney: University of Sydney, 1987), 142–67. Bruce Chatwin’s book *The Songlines* (New York: Viking, 1987) contains several amateurish flaws resulting from a very brief and largely vicarious experience of the subject. Nevertheless, some may find it a useful introduction to a difficult subject. It is, however, a fictionalized mix of travel experiences and restatements of conclusions already published by others, especially T. G. H. Strehlow, and is not the simple traveler’s account it purports to be.

38. A number of Aboriginal people consider the loss of such Dreaming sites and paths to be reversible. A senior Arrernte man from Alice Springs and, quite independently, Narritjin Maymurrur of Arnhem Land have interpreted landscapes in the Canberra region in terms of Dreamings and myths from their own very distant regions; see Peter Sutton, “The Pulsating Heart: Large Scale Cultural and Demographic Processes in Aboriginal Australia,” in *Hunter-Gatherer Demography: Past and Present*, ed. Betty Meehan and Neville White (Sydney: University of Sydney, 1990), 71–80, esp. 71, and Howard Morphy, “Landscape and the Reproduction of the Ancestral Past,” in *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space*, ed. Eric Hirsch and Michael O’Hanlon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 184–209, esp. 184. Canberra lies in a region where earlier local religious interpretations of the landscape were largely, perhaps completely, expunged by the onslaught of colonization. David Mowaljarlai of the Kimberleys considers the Dreaming track fabric of the whole continent to be permanent and immanent, resting latent in those regions where living Aboriginal people no longer know it. See figure 10.34 and David Mowaljarlai and Jutta Malnic, *Yorro Yorro: Everything Standing up Alive: Spirit of the Kimberley* (Broome, Western Australia: Magabala Books, 1993), 190–94 and 205.



Category 1 probably occurs in all media. Category 2 is generally restricted to maps elicited by ethnographers or drawn by Aboriginal people as part of the land rights struggle (see chapter 10). Category 3 occurs in several media, but astronomy as compared with geography is



FIG. 9.6. *HONEY ANT DREAMING*, 1983. Acrylic by Paddy Japaljarri Stewart. On the left is one of the thirty wooden school doors at Yuendumu that were painted by local men. The lowest circle is Wanukurdaparnta. The three above it are Yulyupunyu, the hill Yamparlinyi, and the well at Yakurrukaji. The relative locations of the sites depicted on the painting are shown above.

Photograph courtesy of the Pictorial Collection, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra. By permission of Paddy Japaljarri Stewart, Yuendumu, Australia. Location map after Kay Napaljarri Ross, "Traditional Landscape around Yuendumu," in *Kuruwarri: Yuendumu Doors*, by Warlukurlangu Artists (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1987), 4–5.

a rather rare Aboriginal visual topic (see below). Category 4 appears mainly in crayon drawings and stone arrangements (see chapter 10). In the case of classical Aboriginal iconography, we are mainly concerned with categories 1 and 3. Images of types 1 and 3 might be referred to as icons, in the sense that they are typically conventional religious images that emphasize pattern rather than figurative faithfulness to the thing represented. In chapter 10 I refer to images of categories 2 and 4 as "maps" and "plans" respectively.

#### ICONS OR MAPS?

Although all four types of representation might be considered maps under an extremely broad definition of that term, a closer look at the works themselves reveals a key distinction between iconographies that are aimed principally at showing episodes in localized religious narratives and those that lay out the country as a generalized political or other kind of geography. While both kinds of works aim to represent places and landscapes meaningfully, and both do so using a fundamentally iconic or likeness-based technique, they may differ not only in purpose and cultural content but also in visual conventions, including how completely their makers are committed to iconicity. Individual works, however, may fall somewhere between the two categories. I make the distinction for heuristic purposes.

And yet there is a clear distinction to be made between

people's practical knowledge of a topography and what might be called their design knowledge of it. Gell makes a distinction between subject-centered forms of spatial knowledge that are indexical in character and constitute "images" and non-subject-centered forms of spatial knowledge that are nonindexical and constitute "maps." Indexical knowledge (images) is based on nonindexical knowledge (maps). Although this dichotomy is useful, Gell suggests that "images and maps flow one into the other in mutually related ways."<sup>39</sup>

In the case of the Aboriginal artifacts I discuss in this chapter and the following one, I make a similar distinction between icons and maps, but these are not simply equivalents of Gell's terms. Gell's images and maps are kinds of knowledge that may or may not be made manifest in concrete forms. My own distinction between certain kinds of artifacts is based on their peculiar combinations of meanings, visual conventions, and cultural functions. In particular, Aboriginal icons, while they embody spatial and other knowledge, are better described as being constituted by knowledgeable and emotionally rich *performance* rather than simply by a certain kind of knowledge per se. This explains why their analogic mismatch with one's topographic experience of distance and direction is, and perhaps must be, so thorough.

Aboriginal maps, on the other hand, are far better described as attempts to communicate topographic information across a gap of either knowledge or both knowledge and culture. Here the emphasis is not so much on display or ritualistic performance as on conveying practical knowledge in the form of an analogic picture of a topography and its cultural focal points or subdivisions, one that could actually be useful in finding one's way, for example.<sup>40</sup> Its accessibility is also distinctive and important—that is, a map needs to maximally employ conventions known to both creator and consumer. It needs to be, in this sense, "objective" (non-subject-centered, in Gell's terms). An icon, by contrast, is typically obscure, often quite unintelligible, to some of its "consumers" (ceremonial novices, for example), and "readable" by its more senior observers only because they have already been taught its conventions and referents. As I argue in the next chapter, apart from "mud maps" sketched in the sand for temporary explanatory purposes, Aborigines did not create maps before the coming of the Europeans. As they themselves say: "We don't need a paper map—we've got our maps in our heads." They did, however, feel a driving necessity to create religious images of topographies, or what I call icons.

Although the deeper semantic contents of both kinds of work may be aligned or even very similar in detail, and though there is a certain continuous character to any descriptive movement between the two, it is useful to keep them distinct at the level of ideal types. The key import of

the icons is ostensibly carried by their mythic associations and the roles their designs play in ritual performance. The key import of the maps is ostensibly carried by their role in transmitting information—they are typically made to help non-Aboriginal people understand the layout of the country or to assert land interests vis-à-vis those of other Aborigines in a European-derived context such as a land claims tribunal. This is an account whose simplicity may be called into question (see chapter 10). What is not in question is that the icons, both those produced for internal Aboriginal consumption and those produced for the fine art and artifact markets, vastly outnumber the maps.

It is the perpendicular viewpoint that perhaps most tempts us to categorize Aboriginal images of country as maps, or at least maplike, rather than simply as landscapes.<sup>41</sup> This is because members of industrial cultures tend to associate the perpendicular representation of geography with knowledge and its horizontal depiction with art.<sup>42</sup> Very few images of landscape features produced within Aboriginal classical traditions are shown horizontally, that is, in section rather than in plan view.<sup>43</sup>

39. See the introduction by Eric Hirsch, "Landscape: Between Place and Space," in *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space*, ed. Eric Hirsch and Michael O'Hanlon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 1–30, esp. 18, in which he is summarizing the position of Alfred Gell, "How to Read a Map: Remarks on the Practical Logic of Navigation," *Man*, n.s. 20 (1985): 271–86, esp. 278–80. For further information on the indexical/nonindexical issue, see Michael Silverstein, "Shifters, Linguistic Categories, and Cultural Description," in *Meaning in Anthropology*, ed. Keith H. Basso and Henry A. Selby (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976), 11–55.

40. Maps drawn by Aborigines for land claims, however, may also carry strong performative meanings in what is a highly ritualized forensic context.

41. Barbara Glowczewski, who carried out anthropological research in the Lajamanu area of north-central Australia, found that the aerial view, focusing on the visible world, was complemented by a subterranean view focusing on the virtual and inside world of the Dreaming. (Both views, however, may be said to be in the same perpendicular plane.) She writes: "Most of the desert Aboriginal paintings look like topological maps: they transpose Dreaming myths in the form of circles, ovals or arcs which correspond to geographical sites eventually linked by itineraries (tracks) figured by straight or meandering lines. This apparent aerial vision (from above) is in fact also subterranean, (i.e. looking upwards): a double point of view of the mythical Beings watching the life on earth from the four dimensional space where they live forever, a space where the stars join the inside of the earth." Barbara Glowczewski, ed., *Yapa: Peintres aborigènes de Balgo et Lajamanu* (Paris: Baudoin Lebon, 1991), 166. See also the reviews by Peter Sutton, "From Horizontal to Perpendicular: Two Recent Books on Central Australian Aboriginal Painting," *Records of the South Australian Museum* 21 (1987): 161–65.

42. European maritime explorers long combined both perspectives in their charts, however, a development that may have stimulated the emergence of a figuratively accurate "landscape of fact" in Renaissance and post-Renaissance European painting, particularly among the artists working for the mercantile bourgeoisie in Holland. See Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art* (Mitcham, Victoria: Penguin Books, 1949), 31–49.

43. Animals and human beings and trees—which are like human bod-

Classically based Aboriginal icons of country have often been regarded by scholars as maplike, or even considered maps.<sup>44</sup> Anthropologist Nicolas Peterson, for example, referred to the designs on Warlpiri spear-throwers and sacred boards as “schematic maps.”<sup>45</sup> Fay Gale, a geographer, has referred to similar images by the phrase “art as a cartographic form,” and there she uses a painting by desert artist Tjuburrula as an extended example (see fig. 9.22 below).<sup>46</sup> In a chapter titled “Aboriginal-Australian Maps,” Helen Watson describes bark paintings of northeast Arnhem Land as “highly conventional map[s]” that are “also religious icons.”<sup>47</sup> This use of the term “map” for such works is highly problematic, however. Morphy, in a major study of traditional designs of the Yolngu people of northeast Arnhem Land, has a section titled “The Painting as a Map,” but he does not usually describe bark paintings as maps per se. He points out that the design elements of Yolngu paintings may belong to one of two kinds of meaning, those that refer to mythological events and those that refer to topographical features, though the dichotomy is not always clear-cut because places may also be manifestations of ancestral events. “Many Yolngu paintings can be interpreted from two quite distinct perspectives: first as a record of mythological events, and second as a map of a particular area of land.”<sup>48</sup> More recently Morphy suggests that “topographical representations” may be a better term than maps in such cases, “though I am not against words like map becoming part of an anthropological metalanguage where you actually engage in a process of shifting the central meaning of the term away from its conventional European sense, but as you say that is a gamble since it can work the other way.”<sup>49</sup>

#### MAPS OF MAPS, OR TRANSFORMATIONS?

The very word “maps” carries its own cultural baggage. There is no direct translation for such a word into Aboriginal languages. The conditions under which Aboriginal topographic representations become cartographic are those in which they become of interest to a global audience of geographers and historians of cartography.

In no sense am I suggesting that Aboriginal images are primitive maps or precursors to the allegedly more advanced maps of modern civilizations. This kind of unilinear evolutionist view has long since been discarded by scholars. Aboriginal images of country are not, however, just different maps from those of, say, the Portuguese or the Japanese. A preeminent concentration on topographic symbolism in Aboriginal images perhaps justifies including this chapter in a history of cartography rather than in a history of writing or a history of art, although all three could be justified—and attacked—if one interprets all three

histories as modes of intellectual appropriation by a powerful, and now globally distributed, industrial society.

Aboriginal iconographers make no pretense of representing topography itself as a precultural geography. They are typically, of course, highly accurate in their knowledge of the physical features of their homeland areas, the relative distances between sites, and the direction in which each site lies relative to another. Topographic elements present in their works, however, are frequently rearranged on the image surface with what may appear to be great freedom. The “correctness” with which someone has executed a topographic representation, within Aboriginal practice, is a matter of conformity to certain principles of design rather than iconic fidelity to physiography, relative distance, and direction.<sup>50</sup>

One reason for this interpretation is that in Aboriginal tradition representations of country are conceived of not as pictures of nature (another term untranslatable into

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ies in many ways—may be shown in section view even in the desert or semidesert. As one approaches the north Australian coast from the desert, one finds occasional examples where the general graphic standpoint is horizontal rather than perpendicular. In a somewhat rare development, but one that is well entrenched, rock outcrops in western Arnhem Land paintings are often, but not always, shown in section view; see, for example, the bark painting in Peter Sutton, “Responding to Aboriginal Art,” in *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Peter Sutton (New York: George Braziller in association with the Asia Society Galleries, 1988), 33–58, esp. 45 (fig. 71).

44. In addition, many collectors of Aboriginal images have assigned the term “map” to an image, but this cannot be taken to reflect a choice of terms by the person who made the object. Kupka, for example, describes a painting by Midjau-Midjau collected at Croker Island in western Arnhem Land in 1963 as “Carte de la région d’Oenpelli” (Map of the Oenpelli region), which depicted certain creeks, lagoons, rock art sites, and the location of the painter’s birthplace; see Kupka, *Peintres aborigènes d’Australie*, XLV (note 20).

45. Nicolas Peterson, “Totemism Yesterday: Sentiment and Local Organisation among the Australian Aborigines,” *Man*, n.s. 7 (1972): 12–32, esp. 21.

46. Fay Gale, “Art as a Cartographic Form,” *Globe: Journal of the Australian Map Circle* 26 (1986): 32–41.

47. Helen Watson, “Aboriginal-Australian Maps,” in *Maps Are Territories. Science Is an Atlas: A Portfolio of Exhibits*, by David Turnbull (Geelong, Victoria: Deakin University, 1989; reprinted Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 28–36, esp. 33 and 36. In another work, Watson and Chambers refer to them more broadly as text; see Helen Watson and David Wade Chambers, *Singing the Land, Signing the Land: A Portfolio of Exhibits* (Geelong, Victoria: Deakin University, 1989), 49. Bark paintings are known by many different terms depending on the local Aboriginal language (of which there are some 250). Watson uses the term *dhulan*, which means bark painting only among the Yolngu, in the languages of northeast Arnhem Land.

48. Morphy, *Ancestral Connections*, 221–25 and quotation on 218–19 (note 3).

49. Howard Morphy, personal communication, 15 June 1995.

50. Iconic accuracy may, however, be used as an Aboriginal criterion for excellence in the figurative depiction of, for example, animal species; see Morphy, *Ancestral Connections*, 153 (note 3).

Aboriginal languages) but as designs that themselves show only designs. One could describe these images as “icons of icons” rather than as maps of land, since the designs people have in their heads are what they show in paintings and sculptures, rather than the visual images they hold of the actual details of landscape, vegetation, distances, and directions. Aboriginal icons with topographic content depict something that is itself not so much a representation as a transformation. Topographies, or their presence as designs in Aboriginal paintings and sculptures, do not “represent” the Dreamings or ancestral events but are transformations of them.

Nancy Munn has been the pioneering scholar in the field of Aboriginal iconography, particularly for Central Australia.<sup>51</sup> Her paper “The Transformation of Subjects into Objects in Walbiri [Warlpiri] and Pitjantjatjara Myth” (1970) has played a seminal role in the wider understanding of Aboriginal relationships with place. She posits three types of transformation in Aboriginal myth for the region: metamorphosis (the body of the ancestor is changed into some material object); imprinting (the ancestor leaves the impression of his or her body or of some tool); and externalization (some object emerges from or is taken out of the ancestor’s body).<sup>52</sup> Thus a topographical feature is often both a hill or creek and at the same time a transformation of such a kind, and it remains understood as an ancestor’s body or body part or as an excrescence or imprinting (such as a track) left by an ancestor. The same feature can also be a transformation of a sacred object that “is” the ancestor’s body. A particular hill may thus be a digging stick, a bull-roarer the stick turned into, an ancestral being’s body, and a hill. In Central Australia a sacred stone object (*tjurunga*, *churinga*) incised with designs representing places in a myth is typically itself also regarded as the transformed body or body part of an ancestor and is identified with the living incarnation of that ancestor, who is a particular known individual. Such transformations are not so much becomings as equivalences.

Munn discovered that Warlpiri men represented the sites joined by ancestral travels using combinations of circles and lines. There was an iconic relation between these arrangements and what they depicted, but it was not strictly maplike in the sense of being narrowly iconic. For example, a line of three campsites would be shown as three circles joined by straight lines—but the sites might not be in a straight line in actual known space. Similarly, a meandering line might join circles representing sites on the pathway of an ancestral being who indeed meanders, such as a snake or a stream of water. Again, where the paths of two ancestors crossed, lines in the design might intersect. But, Munn comments, “as these examples demonstrate, the variant arrangements are treated by Walbiri

as ways of depicting different spatial distributions of locales, and are not simply a decorative play with the circle-line motif. It is for this reason that central Australian designs have sometimes been referred to as ‘maps.’”<sup>53</sup>

#### PERFORMANCE VERSUS INFORMATION

A key reason to be cautious about identifying painted and sculpted Aboriginal icons of country as kinds of maps is that they arise principally as display or performance rather than as explanation or record.<sup>54</sup> No doubt Aboriginal ceremonial performances, particularly where novices are inducted into new knowledge, involved and still involve the transmission of information, but even under a tutor the decoding of classical Aboriginal iconographies by a novice typically depends on some foreknowledge both of the landscape depicted and of the conventions used in showing it, especially since “explanation” in an Aboriginal ritual context is often highly cryptic and places the onus on the subject to generate his or her own understanding based on somewhat fragmentary verbal guidance. Information transmission generally, in Aboriginal culture, is more like natural language acquisition than formal instruction in the industrial academy, although at times it may resemble both. That is, novices learn not so much by absorbing preexisting facts under programmed instruction as by generating a model of aspects of the world out of a mixture of explicit statements and a scatter of explanatory shreds and patches, under a general prohibition on asking questions.<sup>55</sup>

51. Nancy D. Munn, “Totemic Designs and Group Continuity in Walbiri Cosmology,” in *Aborigines Now: New Perspective in the Study of Aboriginal Communities*, ed. Marie Reay (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1964), 83–100; idem, “The Transformation of Subjects into Objects in Walbiri and Pitjantjatjara Myth,” in *Australian Aboriginal Anthropology: Modern Studies in the Social Anthropology of the Australian Aborigines*, ed. Ronald Murray Berndt (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1970), 141–63; idem, “Spatial Presentation” (note 29); and idem, *Walbiri Iconography* (note 3).

52. Munn, “Transformation of Subjects,” 142.

53. Munn, *Walbiri Iconography*, 136 (note 3). (The standard spelling of this name is now Warlpiri.)

54. In Central Australian “sand stories,” sites and their spatial relationships, as well as plans of camps, are drawn in sand by tellers of narratives and wiped out as episodes (scenes) end. They are part of the narrative performance, as illustrations, or represented visualizations of narrated events. They are, however, rather like explanatory “mud maps” (see pp. 405–8) drawn to advise travelers of topographical features ahead, in the sense that they are integrated with verbal discourse.

55. Strehlow, *Aranda Traditions*, 5–6, 110 (note 32); idem, *Songs of Central Australia*, 70, 197–98 (note 37); Ken Hale, “Remarks on Creativity in Aboriginal Verse,” in *Problems and Solutions: Occasional Essays in Musicology Presented to Alice M. Moyle*, ed. Jamie C. Kassler and Jill Stubington (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1984), 254–62; and Ian Keen, *Knowledge and Secrecy in an Aboriginal Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

## MEANS AND INTERPRETATIONS

### ENDURING TEMPLATES, EPHEMERAL MATERIALS

Aboriginal icons such as Banapana's bark painting of Djarrakpi (see plate 18 below) are typically constructed using traditional designs, and their makers often say their images are in the style used by their ancestors. Although many Aboriginal design elements have indeed been stable over at least the past century or so, there have also been clear shifts of style.

By designs I do not mean fixed whole images. What is stable in such systems is a stylistically homogeneous set of recurring templates and more or less standard visual devices. These are combined into more or less unique whole images with each act of execution.<sup>56</sup> Until the emergence of the Aboriginal art and artifact markets, most mobile Aboriginal works, at least in the classical tradition, were made for short-term purposes and then left to decay in the elements or were intentionally destroyed as part of the relevant ceremonies. In fact, things made by people were seldom kept and maintained for long periods (by the standards of most other cultures). The transience of the medium was not felt to be inconsistent with the permanency of the symbolism and sacred qualities often attributed to the object itself. Sacred stone slabs and sacred wooden boards, most of them depicting sites of sacred significance, were probably the only topographical representations, apart from designs on rock surfaces, that lasted beyond a few days or months. The wooden *rangga* (sacred posts) of Arnhem Land are often kept in mud in sacred wells, but their designs have to be repainted each time they are used.

In Aboriginal eyes, much less than in those of outsiders, it is almost always the design that matters most, rather than the object it decorates. An image of a sacred water hole, a clan hatching style, a depiction of a certain Dreaming, is usually transposable between media. The same design may be painted, for example, on a boy's body during initiation, on the walls of a wet-season shelter, on a painting made for sale, on a bark or log coffin, on a biscuit box lid, on an aluminum dinghy, or on a pair of sneakers.<sup>57</sup> It is the designs, or rather their elemental templates, that have continuity. In the cultural context of a museum collection, however, the interest of most staff and visitors in the continuities of such objects has at least as much to do with the age and physical preservation of the artifact itself as with the life history of its design components. Sedulous keepers of artifacts in state institutions are sometimes shocked at the apparently cavalier attitude with which Aboriginal people, keepers of the truly felt meanings of such objects, may treat their material expressions in certain contexts.

Non-Aboriginal landholders may need a paper map to demonstrate their tenure within their own legal system.

Aboriginal people often point out that their title deeds, within their own customary law, are not pieces of paper but such things as sacred designs. Thus in theory they may, if they wish, "burn the map and hold the country."<sup>58</sup> Another reason "map" may be a misleading title for Aboriginal topographic images is that such works often make little attempt at technical precision. The European colonists of Australia tended to disparage the visual works of the Aborigines on the grounds that they were crude or rude, not only because they were often executed with little finesse but because of their media, such as roughly chopped sheets of eucalyptus bark (plate 15) or the walls of rock shelters.

Bark painting, at least in several parts of northern Australia, goes back before the arrival of the cash market. A number of early observers recorded that people painted the insides of their bark shelters (fig. 9.7).<sup>59</sup> Even very early barks collected without notice (stolen) from Aboriginal camps are at least roughly rectangular, although the older ones do have more ragged edges than more recent examples.

Most barks used for painting are prepared as follows. Two shallow rings are cut some distance apart around a eucalyptus tree's girth, using an ax. This is usually done around wet season, since the running sap makes it easier to pry off the bark at that time. (Removing the bark kills the tree, although this is not an objective.) The bark sheet is singed to remove loose bits and help flatten it. It may be weighted down with stones or sand for some days, also to make it flat. It is scraped clean, and a ground is laid on the inner surface. The outlines of main designs are then drawn, including borders within which details will be added, followed by more details, and repetitive and decorative elements such as cross-hatching and dotting are added last. Pigments are natural solids ground or crushed and mixed with water and a fixative. By the 1980s the major fixative had become the wood glue Aquadhere (orchid juice was more usual in the past). Red and yellow ochers, kaolin, and charcoal are the main pigments. Brushes are made from sticks, pandanus fibers, hair, and other materials; occasionally a commercial brush is used,

56. On templates in Aboriginal iconography, see Morphy, *Ancestral Connections*, 235–41 (note 3).

57. See Sutton, "Responding to Aboriginal Art," figs. 50, 51, and 85 (note 43).

58. With apologies to Fred R. Myers, see his "Burning the Truck and Holding the Country: Property, Time, and the Negotiation of Identity among Pintupi Aborigines," in *Hunters and Gatherers*, 2 vols., ed. Tim Ingold, David Riches, and James Woodburn (New York: Berg, 1987–88), vol. 1, *Property, Power and Ideology*, 52–74.

59. Norman B. Tindale, "Natives of Groote Eylandt and of the West Coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria, Part II," *Records of the South Australian Museum* 3 (1925–28): 103–34, esp. 115 and 117, and Baldwin Spencer, *Wanderings in Wild Australia*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1928), 2:792–94.



FIG. 9.7. WET-SEASON BARK HUT (SINGLE MEN'S HOUSE), MID-1970s. This bark hut at Manggalod on the Mann River in central Arnhem Land has secular bark paintings on the walls.

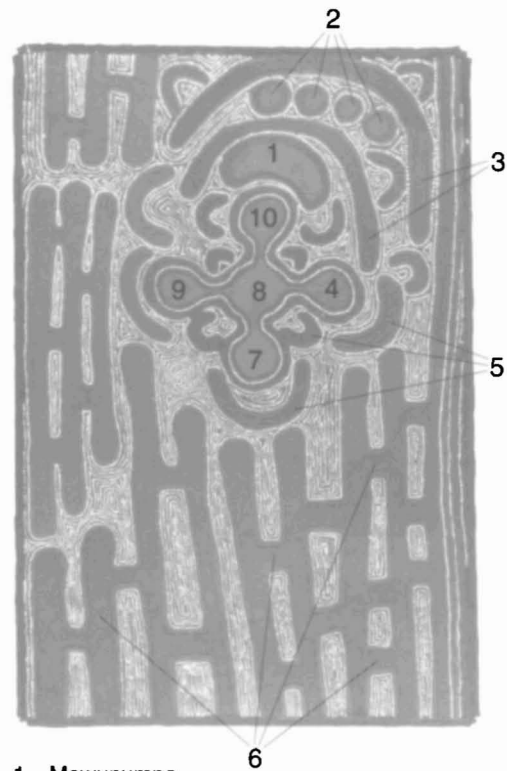
By permission of Howard Morphy.

especially for laying the ground. Many bark painters, particularly since the 1950s, have attached supporting rods to the top and bottom of the bark.

#### CONVENTIONS

When combined into whole images, the classical visual templates are arranged into what are usually plan views whose major elements are schematic images of natural features such as hills, creeks, water holes, and islands or created features such as wells ("soakages"). Their canons of proportion, however, are not highly naturalistic but offer the image maker choices that often reflect different emphases on various myth topics, social relationships between landholders, usually severely reductive graphic principles of symmetry and geometry, and the constraints of the media used (in the 1990s most involved a base surface of a rectangle, either of canvas or of bark, unless they were sculptures or ground designs).

Even where a painting such as Peter Skipper's *Jila Ja-*



1. Mawunumpa
2. Pajpara
3. Long sandhills
4. Mijitawurru (Rain coming from the south)
5. Clouds
6. Sandhills
7. Pirril Pirril (Rain coming from the west)
8. Jila Japingka
9. Kayilipal Kayilipal (Rain coming from the north)
10. Pirntiwanampa (Rain coming from the east)

FIG. 9.8. SCHEMA OF WATER HOLES AT JILA JAPINGKA AND PAJPARA (PLATE 16).

After Christopher Anderson and Françoise Dussart, "Dreamings in Acrylic: Western Desert Art," in *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Peter Sutton (New York: George Braziller in association with the Asia Society Galleries, 1988), 89–142, esp. fig. 141a.

*pingka* (plate 16) shows not only specific Dreaming sites but also a widely distributed physiographic zone of parallel sand hills, the zone itself is shown schematically, as a type rather than as a copy of actual and specific landforms (fig. 9.8). Vegetation associations, running water, clouds, smoke, and similar amorphous, widely or patchily distributed geophysical features are also often shown as formal background patterns in Western Desert and Arnhem Land paintings. In such works the environmental feature that typifies a certain district is thus itself typified rather than figuratively copied.

With few exceptions, a plan view is maintained whether the image is focused on relational patterns between places or on a single site. This approach, I suggest,



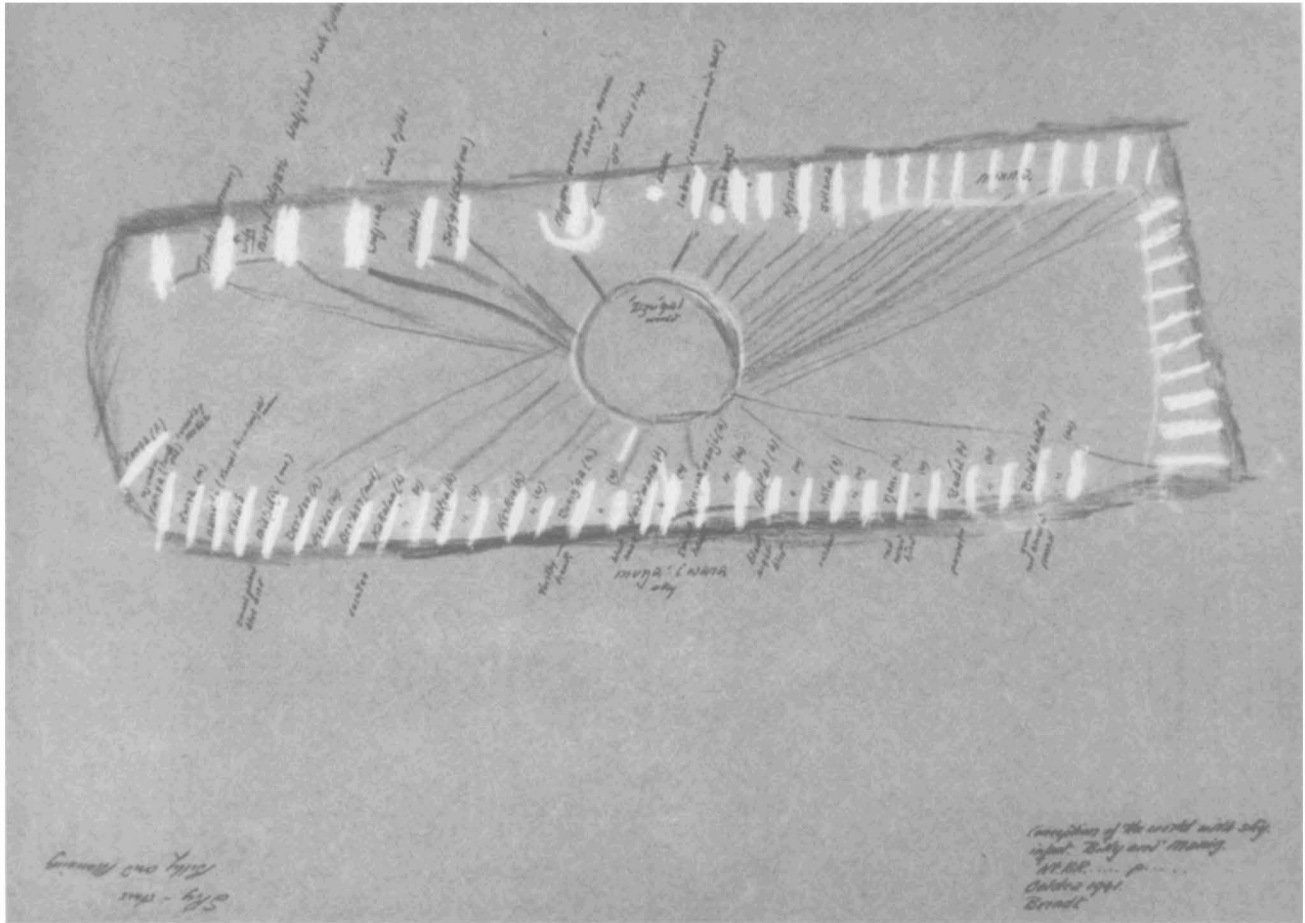


FIG. 9.9. CONCEPTION OF THE WORLD WITH SKY, 1941. Crayon on paper by Billy and Maning, Ooldea, South Australia.

Photograph courtesy of the Berndt Museum of Anthropology, University of Western Australia, Nedlands (P22144).

reflects an emphasis on syntagmatic rather than paradigmatic relations between places, and between different groups of people associated with them, that is deep-seated in Aboriginal culture.

There is enormous variation in the degree of visual complexity of Aboriginal topographic representations. The highly compartmentalized, infilled designs of north-east Arnhem Land may be contrasted with the sparseness of a single daubed circle from the desert. But the formal simplicity of much Aboriginal imagery belies its embodiment of complex social, ceremonial, and mythic meanings. This simplicity often rests on a preference for cryptography and obliqueness demanded by a restricted economy of religious knowledge, the basis of so much power in traditional Aboriginal society.<sup>60</sup> Although practitioners of many visual traditions try to achieve something like a copy of a visual impression, the Aboriginal iconographer generally seeks to create reductive signs for the things represented. Some signs are more reductive than others. The most sacred and ritually dangerous images are often the most schematized, the most geometric,

and thus, by superficial measures, the simplest. From an Aboriginal point of view these are often the deepest works, with the most layered meanings.

The cosmos itself is also layered, in the sense that the subterranean, geophysical, and heavenly zones receive rather different treatment in Aboriginal visual representation. Although Dreamings often move underground, there tends to be little sign of this in the conventions of the images representing the sites thus joined together in myth and song. It is rare, also, for images of stars and planets to be integrated with earthly topographies in these traditions.

#### COSMOLOGICAL AND ASTRONOMICAL DEPICTIONS

Billy and Maning's crayon drawing *Conception of the World with Sky* of 1941 (fig. 9.9), and Njien's *Star Plan*

60. See Morphy, *Ancestral Connections* (note 3); Keen, *Knowledge and Secrecy* (note 55); and Eric Michaels, "Constraints on Knowledge in an Economy of Oral Information," *Current Anthropology* 26 (1985): 505–10. This topic is taken up in more detail below.



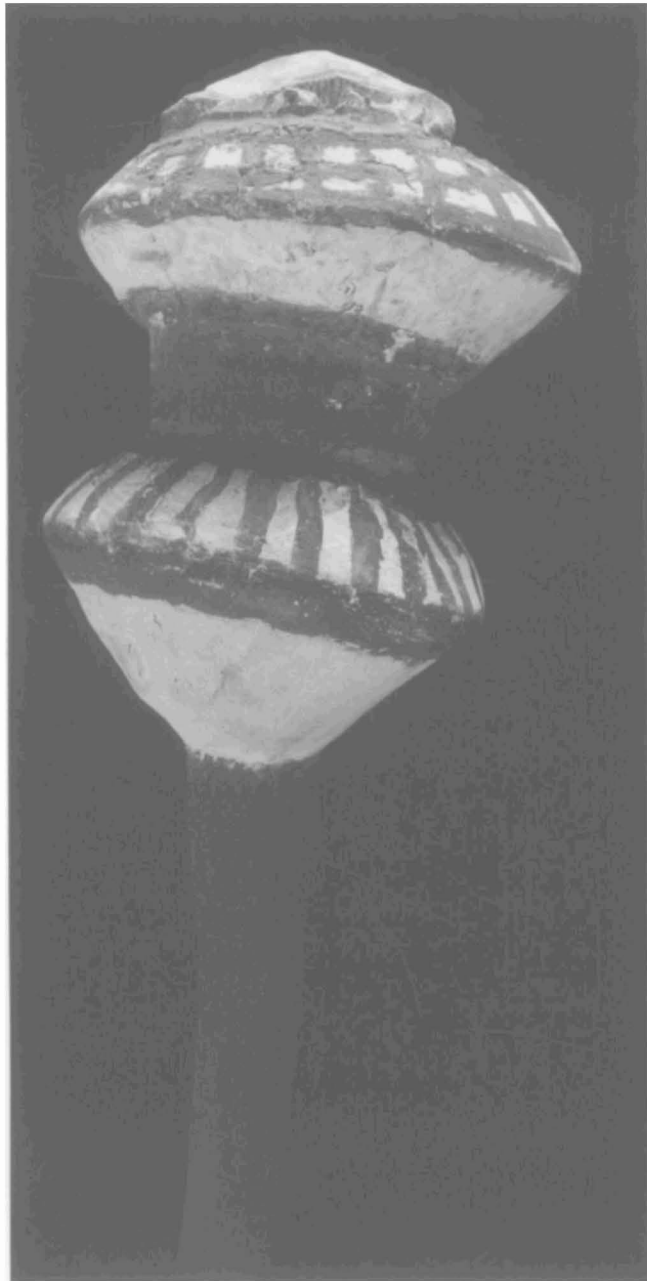


FIG. 9.11. TOA (WAYMARKER) INDICATING THE SITE PALKARAKARA, CA. 1904. Palkarakara (“to climb up onto something in the twilight”), near Lake Eyre, South Australia, is where the ancestral heroes Milkimadlentji and Mitjimamana saw in their mind’s eye the souls of the dead climbing upward. The lower white section indicates the earth, and the recessed waist, with its yellow bands, is the atmosphere between earth and the heavens. The upper white section is the sky, and the vertical lines are the souls of the dead climbing to the heavens. Above are the stars, which are the souls of the dead shown as white patches. The toa, made from gypsum, ochers, and wood, is from the defunct Killalpaninna Lutheran Mission, South Australia. Height of the original: 26.9 cm. Photograph courtesy of the South Australian Museum, Adelaide (A6168).



FIG. 9.12. *ORION AND THE PLEIADES*, 1948. Ocher and manganese on bark painting made at Groote Eylandt by Minimini Mamarika (1904–72) for ethnographic collector. At the top are the wives of the fisherman Burumburumbunya seated in their circular grass hut. This is the constellation known to Europeans as the Pleiades. The T-shaped form at the bottom is the constellation known to Europeans as Orion. Across the top of the T are three fishermen (Orion’s belt), and below them are the fishermen’s fire, two parrot fish, and a skate. Size of the original: 76 × 32 cm. Photograph courtesy of the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide (701PA46). © Copyright courtesy Anthony Wallis, Aboriginal Artists Agency, Sydney.

to be such destinations because they are politically “free.” (The spirit image, or the fleshly ghost, by contrast, is often a second aspect of the person in the afterlife, which is typically sung or otherwise ritually sent to a territorially very symbolic location in or close to the individual’s own homeland.) Another factor, however, may be that in the classical traditions it is generally true that people can represent designs only for country in which they have some licit right, either by birthright or by license from its traditional owners. Since nobody owns pieces of the heavens, perhaps nobody has a normal customary right—or much incentive—to represent them.

#### THE DEPICTION OF TIME IN SPACE

Aboriginal images, as well as sacred song verses, often not only connote a topography and its specific sites but also add the dimension of time, such as seasons of the year or phases of the day. Relative mythic time—that is, a sequencing of events or creative phases within the mythic domain—is rarely of any moment, however. Morphy refers to this as the “subordination of time to space” in the case of Yolngu thought.<sup>64</sup> It is the places where ancestral events occurred, and their relative locations, that are the primary structuring forces in the Dreaming narrative world, not periods or strict episodic sequences.

On the other hand, time in the sense of seasons of the year or phases of the day and night carries much symbolic power in Aboriginal classical thought. Liwukang Bukurlatjpi’s bark painting known to curators as *Squid and Turtle Dreamings* (fig. 9.13), which is concerned with the landscape history of the Wessell Islands, illustrates this. The squid on the left is female and created all the families and places along the Wessell Islands chain. The squid on the right is the male who allocated the places made by the female to estates owned by different Aboriginal clans, the same clans that survive today. Going south along the Wessell Islands chain, he handed over named sacred places to about eleven clans. South Australian Museum documentation contains the details of eleven site names and the clans to which they are said to have been allocated. All the site names are said to mean squid in the various languages of the clans.

The image not only connotes the sacred political geography of the Wessell Islands but also maps time onto that space. The bands of cross-hatching next to the male squid, and on the turtle’s carapace, are in the color sequence black, red, yellow, white. Here these represent night, sunset, sunrise, and still water at midday. The image further suggests the arrival of a certain season. The squid, as Liwukang explained during our conversation at Yirrkala in 1987, transformed itself into turtle. This turtle is associated with the relation between weather and the relative safety of sea travel in the area.<sup>65</sup>

The female squid on the left remains in the Wessell Islands in the form of a rock formation at the island of Djidinja, where the black mark of the squid’s ink can be seen on the landscape, flowing from land to sea. The black paint on the squid here represents this ink also. The island of Djidinja may thus be connoted by the paint color itself and therefore be represented without any depiction of the island’s outward form. Indeed, a whole set of places and times is symbolized in this image dominated simply by three sea creatures, but only local knowledge enables one to see this.

The topographic dimension of *Squid and Turtle Dreamings* is thus hidden until one is told about it. This is not accidental: Aboriginal explications of religious imagery are typically parsimonious, piecemeal, and ambiguous. The notion that one should or even may reveal comprehensive information of this type at a single sitting is alien.

#### KINDS OF OBLIQUENESS

The cryptic, the oblique, the polysemous, the veiled, the secret—all these features and more are characteristic of Aboriginal iconographic traditions in general and have been written about by scholars in considerable detail for the regions of Arnhem Land, Central Australia, and the Western Desert. Howard Morphy’s major work *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge* (1991) has as its focus the role of northeast Arnhem Land iconography in a complex and variably restricted system of knowledge. Another major ethnography from the same region, but based farther west, is Ian Keen’s *Knowledge and Secrecy in an Aboriginal Religion* (1994), in which about a third of the description and analysis is concerned with secrecy and its cultural matrix.<sup>66</sup>

A major contrast employed by the Yolngu of the region is between inside and outside knowledge—knowledge that is more or less restricted (inside) to initiated men is contrasted with things that may be known also to women and children (outside knowledge). Knowledge of both kinds may be combined within a single topographically focused image, such as Malangi’s *Sacred Places at Milmindjarr*’ (plate 17), which I was able to document in detail with Malangi at Ramingining in 1987. The story concerns the travels of the founding ancestral figures known

United States ed. (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions International, 1994), pl. 28.

64. Morphy, “Ancestral Past,” 187–89 (note 38).

65. Once a year the turtle travels north along the chain of islands. When she comes up to breathe she exhales air that turns into clouds. These clouds are a seasonal sign that the sea is smooth, the weather is calm, and the fishing is plentiful.

66. Morphy, *Ancestral Connections* (note 3), and Keen, *Knowledge and Secrecy* (note 55).

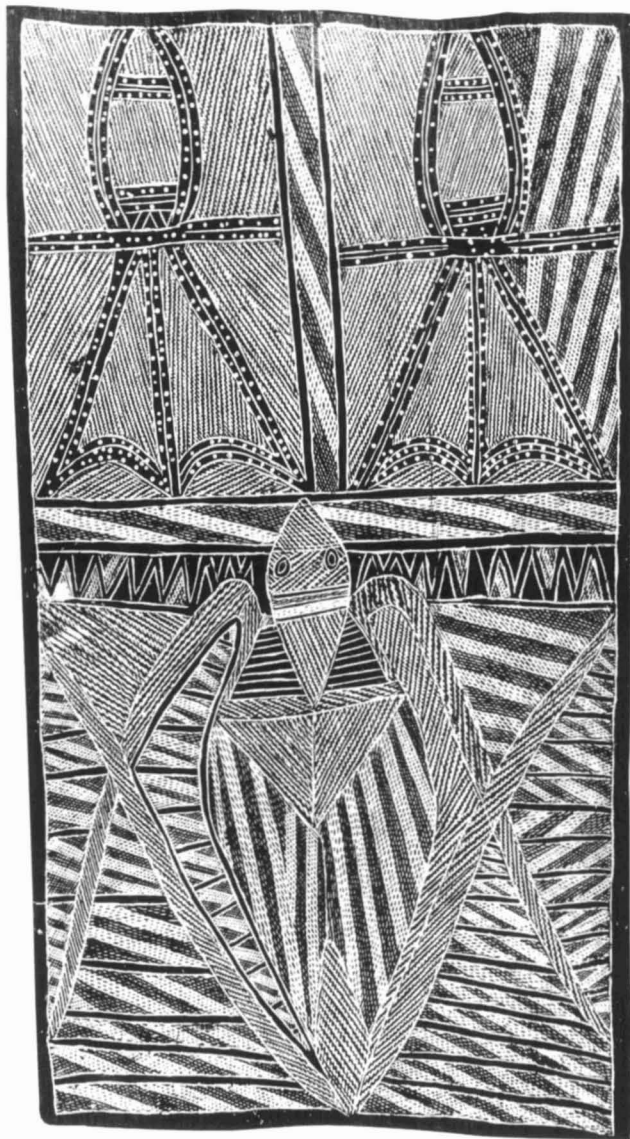
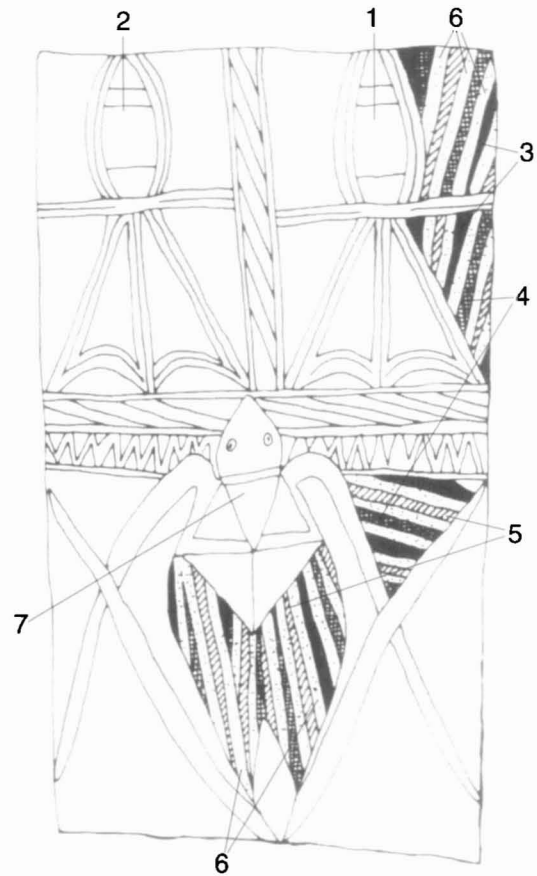


FIG. 9.13. *SQUID AND TURTLE DREAMINGS*, 1972. On the left is the painting, ochers on bark, made for sale by Liwukang Bukurlatipi at Galiwinku, northeast Arnhem Land. Size of the original: 92 × 52 cm. Photograph courtesy of the South Australian Museum, Adelaide (A67540). © Copyright

over much of Arnhem Land as the Djan'kawu Sisters.

This painting is a partial representation of the mythic geography of Malangi's own clan country in the area of Ramingining. His clan is Manharrngu, Dhuwa moiety,<sup>67</sup> of the Djinang language. The story that is central here is a segment of that of the Djan'kawu Sisters, two women whose legendary travels over vast distances in Arnhem Land are locally famous. As they traveled from place to place, paddling their canoe and walking overland, they created the clans (landowning groups) and their languages, named natural phenomena, and created spring



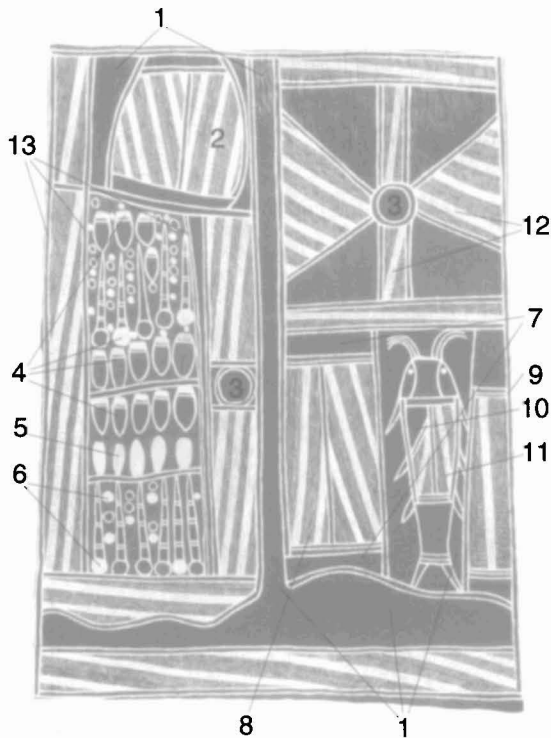
1. Male squid
2. Female squid
3. Night
4. Sunset
5. Sunrise
6. Midday
7. Female turtle

courtesy Anthony Wallis, Aboriginal Artists Agency, Sydney. Schema after Peter Sutton, "Responding to Aboriginal Art," in *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Peter Sutton (New York: George Braziller in association with the Asia Society Galleries, 1988), 33–58, esp. fig. 81a.

waters by plunging their digging sticks into the ground. Elements from only a few episodes of this story are shown in the painting (see fig. 9.14).<sup>68</sup> As Malangi got to mo-

67. Dhuwa and Yirritja are the names of the exogamous patrilineal moieties (halves) of Yolngu society.

68. Further details of the story, from various vantage points in Arnhem Land, are contained in, e.g., Warner, *Black Civilization*, esp. 335–70 (note 26); Ronald Murray Berndt, *Djanggal: An Aboriginal Religious Cult of North-eastern Arnhem Land* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1952); and Ian Keen, "One Ceremony, One Song: An Economy of Religious Knowledge among the Yolngu of North-east Arnhem Land" (Ph.D. diss., Australian National University, 1978). The latter espe-



1. Seawater and tidal stream. The coast opposite Milingimbi is at the bottom, and the tides rise up the river in the center of the painting. The river is all Dhaamala.
2. Garangala Island, David Malangi's country, south of Murrunggwa
3. Milmindjarr', the well
4. The "waterlily" called *ragi* (spikerush, *Eleocharis dulcis*)
5. Spikerush corms, with skin removed
6. Black and white leaves of the spikerush
7. David Malangi's Dreaming
8. White, yellow, and red ocher in regular alternation
9. Catfish Dreaming (Djikkarla)
10. Liver of Catfish
11. "Paint to make him pretty" (Malangi)
12. (Meanings secret)
13. "Little rivers"

FIG. 9.14. SCHEMA OF SACRED PLACES AT MILMINDJARR' (PLATE 17).

After Peter Sutton, "Responding to Aboriginal Art," in *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Peter Sutton (New York: George Braziller in association with the Asia Society Galleries, 1988), 33–58, esp. fig. 80a.

tif 7 (his Dreaming) during our 1987 discussion of this painting, his reply to my usual question about its significance was: "I know. You don't know." And I was not about to be told, either. The line of secrecy is constantly being drawn in such contexts.

#### INDETERMINACY OF INTERPRETATIONS

Apart from varying degrees of restrictedness, Aboriginal classical images of country share another common and

culturally distinctive feature: indeterminacy of interpretations. Although the relation between topography and its representation in Aboriginal images is typically iconic, this does not mean it is typically figurative; indeed, as we have seen, the precise details of physiographic features, relative distances between places, and directional relations between sites are commonly subordinated to the demands of the maker's design. The maker's design itself is typically confined within the conventions of the local iconographic tradition, even though each whole image thus produced may be unique.

Such a schematized and conventionalized approach means that each finished image cannot easily be tied to a single interpretation. It may be subject to varying explanations, even by the same person. This indeterminacy may consist of simple polysemy, in which elements of an image may stand for different things that are symbolically linked or of different levels of secretness. For example, a circle may represent a named water hole, and also the breast of a female Dreaming figure who is said to have created the water hole with her digging stick; at a deeper or more secret level the circle might also represent her vagina. But there are also different interpretations that do not necessarily form layers of contemporaneous meanings in this way. I refer to these as alternatives.

Howard Morphy provides us with a useful example of the latter type of indeterminacy. Morphy's informant Narritjin, of the Manggalili clan, had explicated an image executed by his son Banapana (plate 18) in several different ways on separate occasions (fig. 9.15).<sup>69</sup> First, he had interpreted it as an account of the mythical journey of two koels (a bird species), two opossums, two emus, and a number of other ancestral beings. Although the mythology behind the painting specifies the particular places and clan countries involved, this particular interpretation collapsed the geography, the travels of the Dreamings, and the passage of time into a single image and provided a generalized account of the journey as a whole. On another occasion, Narritjin interpreted the same painting as a specific account of the mythic fashioning of the topography of Djarrakpi at Cape Shield in Narritjin's Manggalili clan country. On a third occasion, and in a way that was unusual and distinctive, Narritjin also used the painting as a topographical map to show Morphy the final stages of his own recent journey there and the work that had been done in building the Manggalili settlement at Djarrakpi, Cape Shield (see fig. 9.16).

cially makes the visual imagery and the details of the myth utterly coherent, but in a way that cannot be revealed here because of religious restrictions on the explanations.

69. Morphy, *Ancestral Connections*, 218–27 (note 3).



### ROCK PAINTINGS AND ENGRAVINGS

Most Aboriginal representations of country were in ephemeral media until the advent of commercial Aboriginal art production. Rock paintings and engravings and stone arrangements were the major exceptions. Rock paintings, while they often represent individual mythic and totemic figures rather than what appear overtly to be landscapes, nevertheless frequently convey meanings embedded in a ritual and mythological system that is specifically based on known particular landscape features and their songs and Dreaming events.<sup>70</sup>

Among the very oldest Aboriginal rock art must be the pecked engravings of the so-called Panaramitee style (fig. 9.17).<sup>71</sup> Widespread on the Australian continent, across regions whose rock painting, other painting, and wooden artifact styles differ considerably, are these engravings of undoubtedly archaic provenance, dominated stylistically by circles, animal and bird tracks, and lines. Over and over again, Aboriginal people have said they were made not by human beings but by Dreaming beings. They are nonetheless able, in many cases, to “read” the engravings. The readings they offer typically relate the designs on the rock to the Dreaming landscape of the immediate region, but in each case they were couched in strong prohibitions on any dissemination of the specific form and meanings of the images beyond a local, initiated

FIG. 9.15. SCHEMA OF DJARRAKPI LANDSCAPE (PLATE 18). Narritjin, Banapana Maymuru’s father, offered three interpretations of this painting. In the first interpretation, each night, at a different place, the koels (4) would sit on top of a native cashew tree (4a). The opossums (the three ringtails in the image) would also climb the tree and spin their fur into string. Each length of string was given to the clan in whose country they had stopped on that occasion. The emus (7) traveled with them, drilling water holes with their feet as they went from place to place.

In the second interpretation, when the koels arrived they landed in some cashew trees (6). While they ate, the opossums (see ringtails) spun their string. Then the koels measured the string by stretching it between two places (5, 6) and gave the string pieces to other clans with close religious links to the Manggalili. The strings became gullies to the north of a lake, and each gully is associated with a different clan. The ancestral beings danced with the fur strings to a sacred cashew tree (4a), where they measured out more strings, the longest of which became the sand hill on the western edge of the lake. An ancestral woman, Nyapilingu, lived in the trees on the opposite side of the lake (2, 3). She traveled up and down her side of the lake, making fur string that later became the coastal dunes on the eastern side of the lake. The emus (7) drilled for water in the Djarrakpi lake bed but found only salt water. Frustrated, they threw their spears into the nearby sea, creating the freshwater springs that are exposed at low tide.

Narritjin’s third interpretation is of the painting as a topographic map. It showed, for example, where during a recent visit the Land Rover had arrived (at C1) and drove along the sand hills to the clump of trees (6), after camping where they had driven to the next clump of trees (5), and where he prayed at the marrawili (cashew) tree (4a), and finally where they started building the airstrip (to the right of the right bird’s head). See also figure 9.16.

After Howard Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 219.

male audience. For that reason such a site will be described in general terms, and no details will be provided.

In the north-central part of the Northern Territory, on a large cattle station called Muckaty, one day in mid-1992 my colleague David Nash and I were taken to a rocky outcrop. We were researching a land claim to permanent inalienable freehold over the property by its traditional owners, on whose behalf the pastoral lease to the land had already been purchased. Senior men of appropriate kinship and ritual status climbed the outcrop first. The rest of us followed. A stone cairn that marked the peak was attributed to the actions of two female Dreaming beings who had paused here on a vast journey across country. This was a journey marked by many events and

70. See, for example, Layton, *Australian Rock Art*, and Chaloupka, *Journey in Time* (both note 15).

71. Charles Percy Mountford and Robert Edwards, “Rock Engravings of Panaramitee Station, North-eastern South Australia,” *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia* 86 (1963): 131–46, and Margaret Nobbs, “Rock Art in Olary Province, South Australia,” *Rock Art Research* 1 (1984): 91–118.

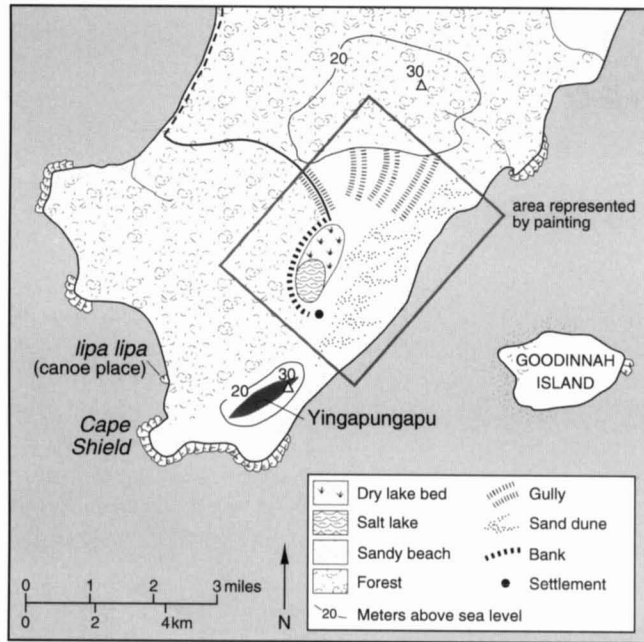


FIG. 9.16. REFERENCE MAP OF DJARRAKPI AREA, NORTHEAST ARNHEM LAND. Compare figure 9.15 and plate 18.

After Howard Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 223.

significant sites, a large number of them celebrated in the ceremonial songline for the two figures. On flat sections of the outcrop were old pecked designs of a nonfigurative kind. Each one was identified either as a site on the Dreaming track of the two beings in the story or as a line connecting sites along the path of their heroic journey.

## REGIONAL EXAMPLES

There is not space here to cover the geographical iconographies of all regions of Aboriginal Australia, but the following discussion covers salient aspects of the traditions of northeast Arnhem Land, western Cape York Peninsula, the Western Desert, and the Lake Eyre basin.

### JEALOUSLY GUARDED DESIGNS: NORTHEAST ARNHEM LAND

In classical Aboriginal traditions, sacred designs are not public, anonymous property. Ancestral beings, Dreamings, gave them to certain groups to hold in sacred trust. Infringements of this kind of copyright are in some places still met with vigorously applied sanctions. Australian law also recognizes Aboriginal copyright, but only for whole images, not particular motifs such as clan-specific patterns.

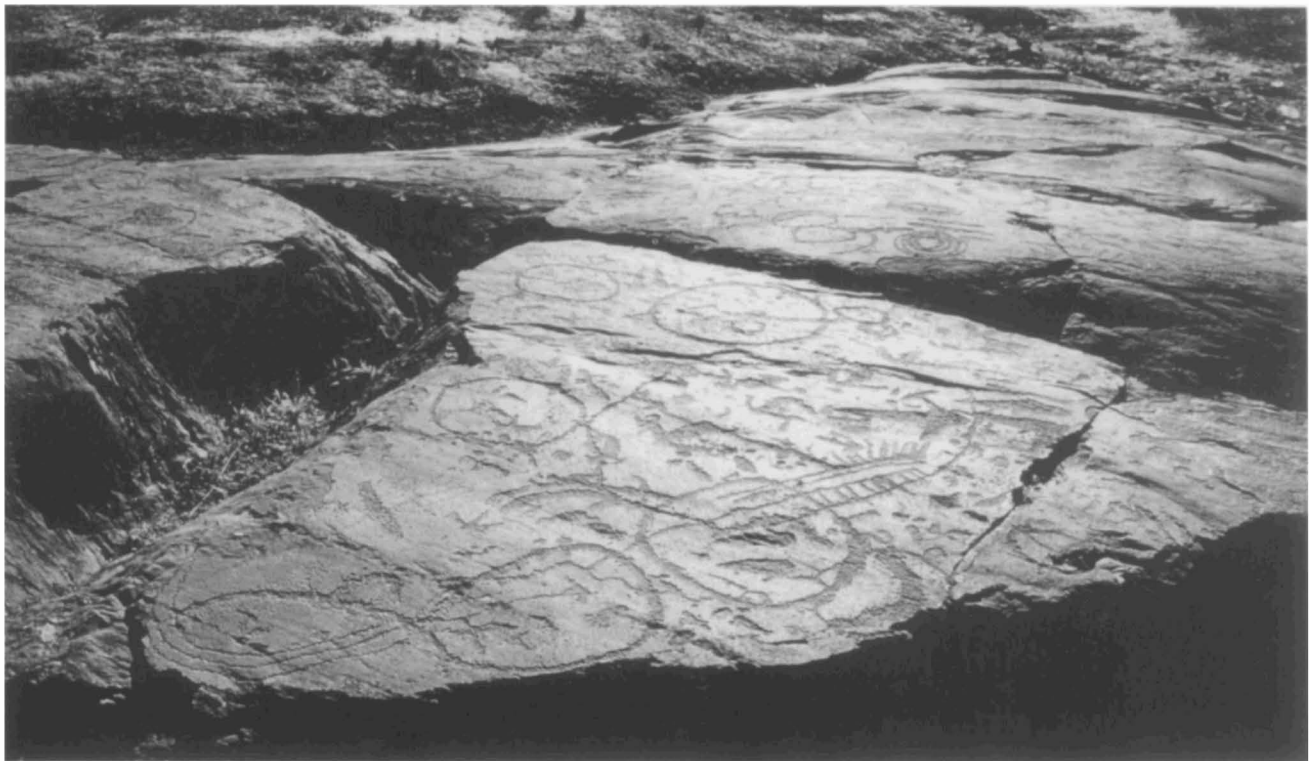


FIG. 9.17. PANARAMITEE STYLE ENGRAVING, YUNTA, SOUTH AUSTRALIA. By permission of Grahame L. Walsh.




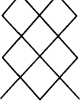


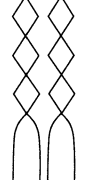

CLAN DESIGN	OWNING CLAN AND DESCRIPTION
	Dharlwangu Equilateral diamond, smaller than the Munyuku one.
	Munyuku Equilateral diamond, larger than the Dharlwangu one.
	Gumatj 1 and 2 Elongated diamond, shorter than the Gumatj 3 one.
	Gumatj 3 Elongated diamond, longer than the Gumatj 1 and 2 one.
	Mardarra Separate strings of elongated diamonds, ending in  .

FIG. 9.18. CLAN VARIANTS OF THE YIRRIJJA MOIETY DIAMOND DESIGN TYPE, NORTHEAST ARNHAM LAND. These five clans of the Yirritja moiety are connected by the journeys of a set of ancestral beings who include Fire and Wild Honey. The mythic explanations for the origins of these various designs refer to the cells of beehives, the patterns of folded paperbark, and the markings of fire, including the markings burned onto a crocodile's back, forming the cellular pattern of its scales, during mythic events. For example, in the Gumatj clan's Fire pattern, red diamonds represent flames, red and white crosshatched diamonds represent sparks, black diamonds represent charred wood, and white diamonds represent smoke.

After Howard Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 172.

The traditional owners of Aboriginal designs may be loose regional groupings, members of cult lodges<sup>72</sup> linked by Dreaming tracks, members of patrilineal clans, and so on, depending on which part of Australia is involved. This particular system appears to be at its most precise and forceful in northeast Arnhem Land, where great harm could arise from the misappropriation of others' designs.<sup>73</sup> Even to "speak for" another group's clan design was to invite serious trouble, especially from the more tradition oriented ("the old people").<sup>74</sup> The icons of classical Aboriginal practice are thus never merely statements of religious geography, but express political and economic geography as well. The principal underlying reason is that Aboriginal interests in land, under customary

law, are essentially framed by religious principles rather than by histories of physical occupation and economic use of land. Usufruct and residence rights, however, ultimately have their basis in symbolic linkages between people and land mediated by the sacred domain, and most particularly by linkages sanctioned in myth, totemism, and ceremonial practice.

In northeast Arnhem Land, clans, which are generally small groups of people linked by descent in the male line and are the primary landowning units,<sup>75</sup> have distinctive designs that are used in paintings. These clan designs, as Morphy says, "cover the surface of the painting in areas defined by figurative representations and certain other components. . . . These designs consist of repeated sequences of geometric elements elaborately infilled with cross-hatching. The designs vary according to which Ancestral Beings the design is associated with and which clan it belongs to."<sup>76</sup>

To exemplify this Morphy lists five distinct variations on the diamond pattern associated with five clan groups that belong to the same Yirritja moiety (fig. 9.18). But Morphy's major study of the artistic system of northeast Arnhem Land, on which I draw so heavily here, has shown that there is no simple relation between painters as members of clans, the Dreaming sites of clan estates (owned lands), and clan designs in paintings.<sup>77</sup>

72. Members of a totemic cult patrilineage in north-central Australia are the core custodians, structurally speaking, of a particular Dreaming in its localized manifestation. See Mervyn J. Meggitt, *Desert People: A Study of the Walbiri Aborigines of Central Australia* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1962), 47–74.

73. When we were interviewing Gambali in Yirrkala, northeast Arnhem Land, about paintings to be used in the exhibition "Dreamings" (Sutton, *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia* [note 3]), he alerted us to this possibility.

74. "With Old People," Gambali warned, "everything politics." "Old People" usually refers to ancestors and their continuing spirits, or to living senior authorities, in Aboriginal English.

75. Keen, *Knowledge and Secrecy*, 63–64 (note 55), convincingly argues that the term "clan" is problematic in the case of this particular region and avoids its use, preferring "group." "Clan" is so well established in the literature for the region, however, that it is likely to have some staying power. I maintain it here for convenience, to avoid the imprecision of the term "group," but without proposing that these clans are more enduringly well-defined corporations than the best ethnography suggests.

76. Howard Morphy, "What Circles Look Like," *Canberra Anthropology* 3 (1980): 17–36, esp. 26–27.

77. Howard Morphy, "'Too Many Meanings': An Analysis of the Artistic System of the Yolngu of North-east Arnhem Land" (Ph.D. diss., Australian National University, 1977). See also the following works by Howard Morphy: "Yingapungapu—Ground Sculpture as Bark Painting," in *Form in Indigenous Art: Schematisation in the Art of Aboriginal Australia and Prehistoric Europe*, ed. Peter J. Ucko (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1977), 205–9; "The Art of Northern Australia," in *Aboriginal Australia*, by Carol Cooper et al. (Sydney: Australian Gallery Directors Council, 1981), 52–65; "'Now You Understand': An Analysis of the Way Yolngu Have Used Sacred Knowledge to Retain Their Autonomy," in *Aborigines, Land and Land*

RELATIVE FREEDOM: RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM AND  
LANDOWNERSHIP IN WESTERN CAPE YORK PENINSULA

The political economy of owned designs in this kind of society is paralleled in complexity by the religious politics of land interests, and the two domains overlap considerably. In normal circumstances, for a northeast Arnhem Land person to paint a design that refers to another clan's country, using the other's distinctive decorative patterns, where the person has no link of descent or other codified rights in that clan's *sacra*, is to break Aboriginal law and cause serious conflict. By contrast, in the Wik-speaking region of western Cape York Peninsula people are relatively free to make designs that refer to symbols and places associated with another nearby group.

In the western coastal region of the Peninsula, at least, there is a great freedom—striking by desert and eastern Arnhem Land standards—in how people may employ symbols associated with the countries of other clans in the region.<sup>78</sup> It is thus possible for Wik persons to legitimately represent sites in clan estates other than those in which they themselves have a proprietorial interest.<sup>79</sup>

The relative freedom with which site-specific images may be employed in Wik designs is exemplified by a bark painting made by Angus Namponan in 1976 (fig. 9.19).<sup>80</sup> The image contains three panels, and various motifs within each panel have been identified (fig. 9.20). The sites referred to appear on figure 9.21.

Panel A (“Spearing Milkfish by Night”) is an image drawn from an important myth and related ceremonial performance that is part of the Winchenem ceremonial group's spiritual heritage. Three men are spearing milkfish.<sup>81</sup> The specific site referred to in this panel is given by Namponan as Wuben (see fig. 9.21).<sup>82</sup> The artist is not a member of the clan whose estate includes the location of the mythic events shown here, nor is he a member of this ceremonial group. His own estate is just inland from Cape Keerweer, and his ceremonial group is Apelech. The remaining panels, B and C, depict mythic events at sites that belong to Apelech clans, although again neither site is specifically a part of Namponan's own clan country or one to which he has particularly close lineal connections.

The mythic reference in panel B (“Mother Shark at Man-yelk”) is to the Shark totemic story complex focused on the area of Man-yelk, the large estuary of the Kirke River just inland from Cape Keerweer. Shark is a major totem of the clans whose lands surround this estuary.<sup>83</sup> The two sides of the Kirke River belong to different clans. The clans have different languages and significant differences in their totems but have long enjoyed an alliance. By invoking this particular story and its geography, Namponan “maps” in a single image the fact that the two groups are distinct but linked or, in local parlance, “same but different.”<sup>84</sup> Both the panel's specific mythic content

and its decorative patterning (Apelech dotting)<sup>85</sup> refer directly to a known area. The mythic event conjures up specific sites, while the pattern of dots conjures up a broad area and the collectivity of its traditional owners. Namponan's image thus evokes another powerful cultural theme in Wik culture: the relation of the part (here local clan estates) to the whole (the regional group).

In panel C (“Two Thirsty Spirits at Moolench”), two male spirit images are shown dancing in an Apelech ceremony, holding ceremonial poles. The location of the myth

*Rights*, ed. Nicolas Peterson and Marcia Langton (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1983), 110–33; *Journey to the Crocodile's Nest* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1984); “On Representing Ancestral Beings,” in *Animals into Art*, ed. Howard Morphy (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 144–60; “From Dull to Brilliant: The Aesthetics of Spiritual Power among the Yolngu,” *Man*, n.s. 24 (1989): 21–40; *Ancestral Connections* (note 3); and “Ancestral Past” (note 38).

78. This remark applies not only to the Wik region, from the Embley River to the Edward River and inland to about Coen, but also in the Mitchell River region to the south (Barry Alpher, personal communication, 4 October 1995).

79. This freedom applies not only to two-dimensional images but also to mythology and music. Sacred narratives, which always describe events at known places and therefore at locations in known clan estates, may be told by members of groups from within the region who do not necessarily have a close relation to the estates in question.

80. For further details about this painting, including translations of text given in Aboriginal languages, see Peter Sutton, “Bark Painting by Angus Namponan of Aurukun,” *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum* 30 (1990–91): 589–98.

81. A species also known as bonefish. In ceremonial performances by the Winchenem group, carved representations of these fish have often been used. See the University of Queensland Anthropology Museum example illustrated in J. Bartlett, “Australian Anthropology,” in *Cultural Exhibition of Queensland*, by J. Bartlett and M. Whitmore (Saitama, Japan: Saitama Prefectural Museum, 1989), 13–70, esp. 66 and cat. A158, and the National Museum of Australia installation illustrated in Morphy, “Art of Northern Australia,” 58, 129 (color pl. 9), and 154–55 (cat. N217) (note 77). See also the film *Dances of Aurukun* of 1962 (held by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra) for an example of the use of these milkfish (bonefish) carvings in Winchenem performance.

82. Detailed field mapping by David Martin with members of the relevant clan has established that the precise location is called Walkaln-aw, literally “Milkfish Totemic Center.” Further details of this site and the others related to the painting are contained in Peter Sutton et al., *Aak: Aboriginal Estates and Clans between the Embley and Edward Rivers, Cape York Peninsula* (Adelaide: South Australian Museum, 1990). This is currently a restricted document.

83. The dominant narrative for the shark complex is that of the two young women. A published version of that story is to be found in my commentary on the sculptures of the Two Young Women of Cape Keerweer, by Angus Namponan, assisted by Peter Peemuggina and Nelson Wolmby, in Sutton, “Dreamings,” 26–29 (note 18).

84. This shark complex is vital to the Apelech mythic and ceremonial cycle that extends geographically from just south of Archer River to between the Knox and Kendall Rivers in coastal western Cape York Peninsula. For published material on this cycle see Sutton, “Mystery and Change,” 84 (note 33).

85. For more on the dot pattern and its relation to the Apelech group, see Sutton, “Dreamings,” 28–29 (note 18).

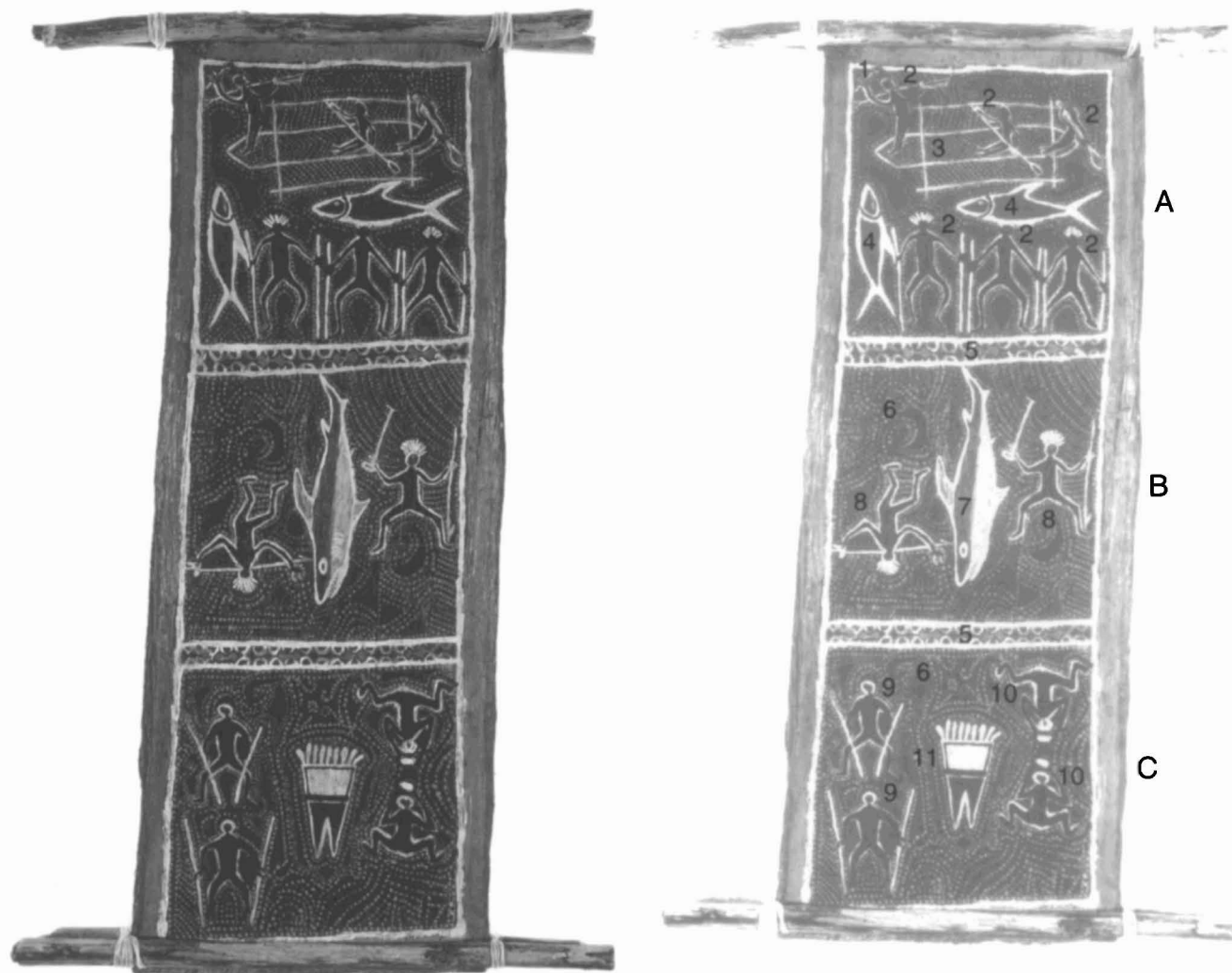


FIG. 9.19. THREE DISTINCT MYTHIC EPISODES IN A SINGLE IMAGE. The painting, ochers on bark, wooden restrainers, and string, was made for sale by Angus Namponan, 1976, Aurukun, western Cape York Peninsula. There are three vertical panels. For an explanation of the mythic episodes, see figure 9.20.

Size of the original: 55 × 20 cm. Photograph courtesy of the Queensland Museum Board of Trustees, Brisbane. By permission of Garry Namponan, Aurukun, Queensland.

FIG. 9.20. SCHEMA FOR FIGURE 9.19. Panel A shows three men (2) spearing milkfish. One has a multipronged spear hooked up to his throwing stick, and the other two hold paddles. The outrigger canoe (3) is shown in plan view, while the figures in it are shown three-quarters frontally in perspective. They are spearing fish at night—one man in the outrigger canoe is holding aloft a torch (1)—and the season is also suggested, since these fish are speared in this way from August to October. The milkfish themselves are indicated by the typically streamlined fish forms with dark side patterning (4). Part of the borders between panels is made up of large half circles (5) referred to as “Winchenem dots” and also as “from on top.”

This is because most of the clans associated with Winchenem ceremony have estates in the dry sclerophyll uplands east of the coastal floodplains. The inland countries are “on top,” and the coastal countries are “bottom side.” Panel B shows two men (8) with spears (one also holds a throwing stick) and a large shark (7). The men wear feather cockades and are engaged in a ritual enactment based on what appears to have been a seasonal physical process as well: the removal of juvenile sharks from the pregnant mother shark, followed by releasing the living mother back into the water. This is part of Apelech ceremonial performance, in which carvings of sharks are used. The fine dotting (6) is said to be Apelech dotting. In panel C, two male spirit images (9) have just been ritually sent by their living relatives, as spirit images of the deceased are still sent soon after a death, to a site in the area just south of Cape Keerweer. There they encounter two women (10) who are sitting and squeezing the white fluid out of the flesh of stingrays. The white objects in their hands are lumps of stingray flesh. The location of the myth is a well depicted by the geometric form in the center (11).

After Peter Sutton, “Bark Painting by Angus Namponan of Aurukun,” *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum* 30 (1990–91): 589–98, esp. 591.

is a water well, depicted by the very geometric form in the center. This form contains the triangular base designs so distinctive of the painting tradition of this area.<sup>86</sup> The name of the site was given in this case (by Namponan) as Thum-merriy. This is a well-known site name, but further details given by Namponan and Wolmby suggest that the precise location of the story is actually a place within Thum-merriy called Moolench.<sup>87</sup>

Bark painting has never become a common medium of expression in this particular region.<sup>88</sup> Namponan's painting, however, is characterized by several features often said to be typical of bark paintings in the Northern Territory: symmetry, fineness of execution, a contrast between solid primary motifs and a detailed infill, and a "quotative" approach to representing sacred myth in that only one or two episodes are shown, implying the rest of the story.

#### FORM AND COMPOSITION IN THE DESERT

In Central Australia, painting is performed on large, irregular surfaces such as rock walls and slabs or on ground areas made of pulverized termite mounds. It is also performed on the far more symmetrical and limited bases of the human body and of mainly ovate artifacts such as shields, wooden dishes (plate 19), sacred boards, sacred stones, ceremonial posts, and bull-roarers. Very few of these media are rectangular.

Since the early 1970s, Western Desert acrylic painters have added to these older media the rectangular canvases and artists' boards that arrive ready-made or are prepared in the community craft shop. Right-angled corners and straight edges have suddenly exerted new pressures on ancient design practices.

For those unfamiliar with their literal meanings, the acrylic paintings of desert Australia demand more immediate attention for their composition than for their depiction of things outside themselves. Their style is far less obviously iconic, less figurative, than that of most bark painting. Some bark paintings do look just like acrylics, but they are a minority.<sup>89</sup> With acrylics the focus is much more often their arrangement of motifs on a ground or against dotted background areas.

These compositional arrangements in desert painting since the 1970s rest on an ancient past, albeit one now entering an uncertain future. As iconic mappings of political geography—only one of their many roles—these works are conservative statements about relationships between people and land, relationships sanctioned by the Dreaming. Thus they present, and reinforce, not merely order, but a particular order in each example. It is therefore appropriate that they be schematized, compressing the unruly facts of geography into a semblance of the balance, symmetry, and reciprocity desired of human rela-

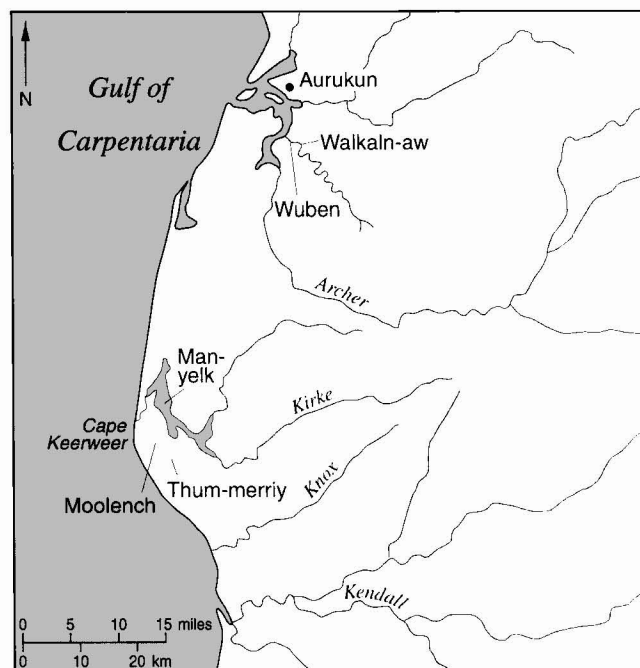


FIG. 9.21. REFERENCE MAP OF SITES REFERRED TO IN FIGURES 9.19 AND 9.20.

After Peter Sutton, "Bark Painting by Angus Namponan of Aurukun," *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum* 30 (1990–91): 589–98, esp. 594.

tionships themselves. Desert designs are at the high end of the scale of geometric and symmetrical tendencies among Aboriginal visual traditions.

The strong tendency of modern Western Desert painting toward rectilinearity and symmetry has classical Aboriginal religious and intellectual foundations. This tendency has also been a major factor in granting it a distinctive level of intelligibility for members of other cultures and has thus underpinned its exposure to a wide audience through the commercial art market and galleries. And yet it has been the individual motifs, not the whole images and their structures, that have gained the most

86. Triangles are rare in traditional Aboriginal designs. Apart from Cape York Peninsula, the main area where they are found is northeast Arnhem Land. In both cases, long-established foreign artistic influence—in Arnhem Land from the Macassans, here from Torres Strait—is probably the origin of the form.

87. I am indebted to the anthropological field mapping of David Martin for this information on Moolench. Moolench is an extremely dangerous place, the home of a monster called Wuthelpal, a huge snakelike being with a mane of long hair and feathers, resembling a "lion."

88. Bark paintings are a medium introduced to Cape York Peninsula since the 1970s through the influence of the arts and crafts industry, and very few have been produced there or have found their way into public collections. Namponan's own preferred medium is wood, and he regularly carves crocodiles for sale (unpainted) and sacred sculptures for house-opening ceremonies (painted).

89. See Sutton, *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, figs. 40 and 88 (note 3).

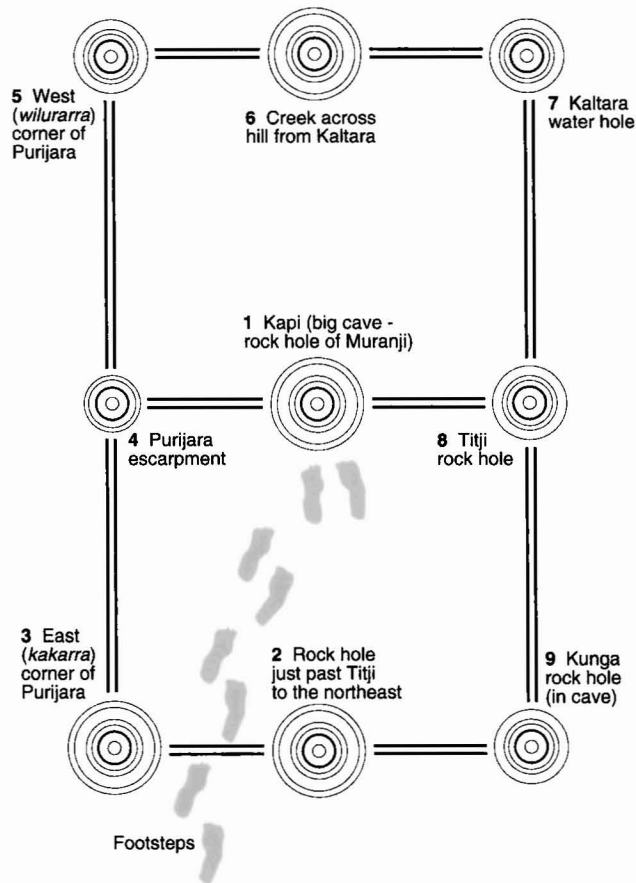


FIG. 9.22. SCHEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF MURANJI ROCK HOLE AREA. Based on the painting by Big Peter Tjuburrula, ca. 1974; whereabouts of the original are unknown. Tjuburrula's rearrangement of the sites into a pattern reflects the sequence of events in the story, which concerns a young boy's escape from a homicidal old woman. Beginning at the cave at the center of the image (1), the story's events proceed clockwise through the other numbered sites, with the southeast and southwest corners of the escarpment (3 and 5) providing the foundation for the most iconic of the resemblances between this painting and the spatial distribution of the sites in real space. Tjuburrula's image, like all such Western Desert paintings, is a plan view, as if seen from above. After David Lewis, "Observations on Route Finding and Spatial Orientation among the Aboriginal Peoples of the Western Desert Region of Central Australia," *Oceania* 46 (1975-76): 249-82, esp. 268.

emphasis in explanatory readings of works that have been published.

Writers on the Aboriginal art of the Western Desert and associated regions have often been at pains to isolate these recurring motifs and to offer lists of their denotations.<sup>90</sup> Together with an account of the myth or myths shown in a painting and the geographic relations between the sites featured, these motif glosses may, one supposes, cumulatively offer an interpretation of the whole painting, just as the legend of a printed topographical map explains its conventions and helps one read the map's unique content.

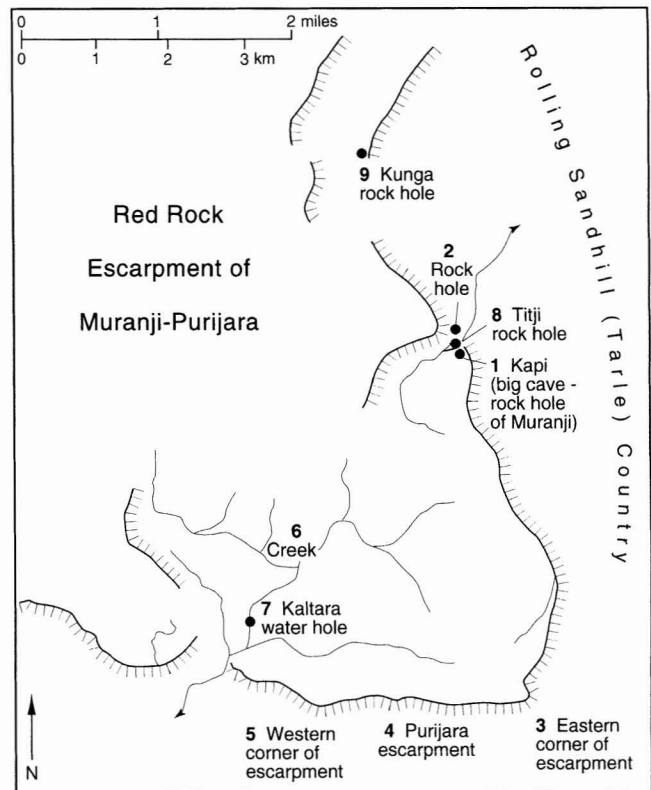


FIG. 9.23. "WESTERN" CONVENTIONAL PORTRAYAL OF THE AREA SHOWN IN FIGURE 9.22. Drawn from a modern topographic map.

After David Lewis, "Observations on Route Finding and Spatial Orientation among the Aboriginal Peoples of the Western Desert Region of Central Australia," *Oceania* 46 (1975-76): 249-82, esp. 269.

But there is much significance in what is excluded from such images, just as there is meaning in what has been selected for inclusion. Only certain myths of a particular geography are normally shown in a single Aboriginal painting, making it more a kind of quotation than an attempt at comprehensive depiction. Similarly, only certain of the sites to which the relevant Dreamings traveled are usually shown. Furthermore, the act of symmetrically rearranging key landscape features in such an image is itself a kind of exclusion—the messiness of showing the proportional distances between places, and their actual orientation with regard to each other, is to a significant degree eliminated.

#### Schematization of Spatial Relations

David Lewis, who made a study of Aboriginal navigation in the region in the 1970s, has published examples of the

90. For a more detailed discussion see Peter Sutton, "The Morphology of Feeling," in *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Peter Sutton (New York: George Braziller in association with the Asia Society Galleries, 1988), 59-88, esp. 81 and n. 31 (p. 246).

way Western Desert painting schematizes spatial relations between places using the site-path framework.<sup>91</sup> In figures 9.22 and 9.23, Lewis presents us with a direct comparison between Big Peter Tjurrula's painting of a set of mythically linked sites and a "Western" view of the same landscape drawn from a 1:250,000 map.<sup>92</sup> It is clear from this comparison that the painting shows the same sites as does Lewis's map, but their relative placement is very different both in mutual orientation and in the distances between them. The variability indicated by the map is radically reduced; the topographic background—intimately well known to the artist—has effectively been dropped out; the asymmetry of the distributional pattern of the sites has been thoroughly rectified; and the shapes of the sites' different physical features have been remade into the geometry of circles. Tjurrula's painting is clearly an icon rather than a map, in the rather simplistic terms I discussed earlier. And yet it is more than just an aesthetically satisfying design. It does have an indicative or way-showing capability as well, but it is one that heads the viewer along a story line rather than across rocks and sand hills.

#### The Site-Path Framework

The symmetrical composition of most Western Desert paintings can generally be interpreted as systematic reductions of or balanced extracts from the hypothetical template or grid known as the site-path framework (fig. 9.24).<sup>93</sup> Patterns based on such a template may be found on ancient stone sacred objects that cannot be shown here, on painted shields, in cave paintings, in crayon drawings by desert people who depicted country and Dreamings for ethnographers in the 1930s to 1950s, in bark paintings, and par excellence, in acrylic paintings of the Western Desert (fig. 9.25).

The archaeologist Daniel Sutherland Davidson noted that Aboriginal art produced an infinite number of designs from a limited number of elements.<sup>94</sup> I suggest that much Western Desert art produces a finite design by subtraction—perhaps "quotation"—from a potentially unbounded grid of connected places-Dreamings-people, in which real spatial relations are literally rectified and represented by symmetrically ordered roundels in a site-path framework. This framework is manifested graphically as usually balanced sets of circle-path arrangements or sets of unconnected circles. The circles typically stand for sites, and the lines that join them are the Dreaming paths that connect the sites in myths.

Such a template or grid of essentially unlimited size works against the notion that particular centers in the landscape might be privileged above all others, and it reflects a culture in which there are no fully bounded groups and the underlying pattern is one of continuously overlapping egocentric social networks. It also reflects the

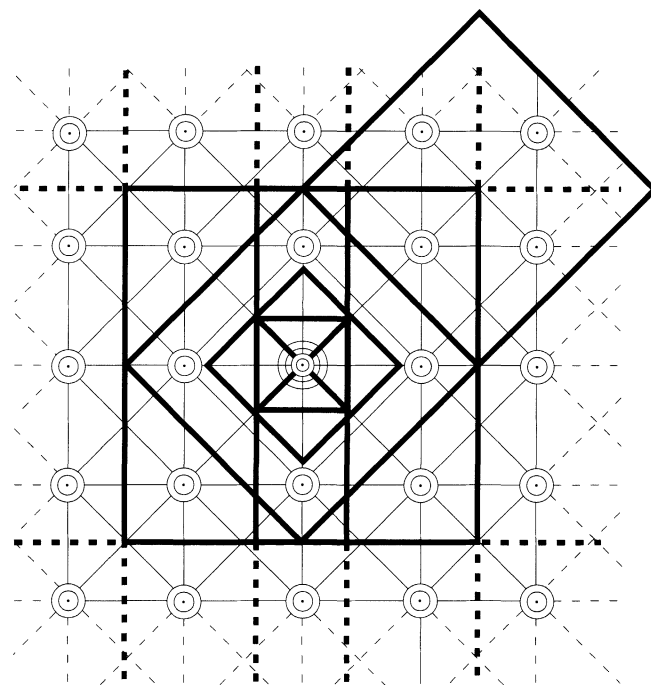


FIG. 9.24. THE SITE-PATH FRAMEWORK. Borders indicate typical extracts made for Western Desert paintings. After Peter Sutton, "The Morphology of Feeling," in *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Peter Sutton (New York: George Braziller in association with the Asia Society Galleries, 1988), 59–88, esp. fig. 132.

fact that Western Desert groups are generally focused on areas deep within the Australian hinterland and that the ultimate boundary—the sea—rarely figures in their topographic representations.

This template is a model of desert political geography, emphasizing multiple centers of local focus, and a manifold connectedness between places and their people. The smallness of the fragments drawn from this template, as seen in Western Desert paintings, reflects the time and space limitations of making selections for specific narrative purposes and the geopolitical limits on a painter's authority to depict country. In a tradition-oriented Aboriginal society, those who control the mysteries have

91. David Lewis, "Observations on Route Finding and Spatial Orientation among the Aboriginal Peoples of the Western Desert Region of Central Australia," *Oceania* 46 (1975–76): 249–82.

92. "Western" is probably an inappropriate term here for two reasons. First, such views and maps are common to members of global industrial society, whether they are in, or from, the "West," the "East," or, say, the Pacific Ocean. Second, the use of "Western" is derived from a situation long past in which people of Western Europe could universalize their own local perspective.

93. Munn, *Walbiri Iconography*, 128–38 (note 3). See also Sutton, "Morphology of Feeling," 80–86 (note 90).

94. Daniel Sutherland Davidson, *A Preliminary Consideration of Aboriginal Australian Decorative Art* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1937), esp. 93.

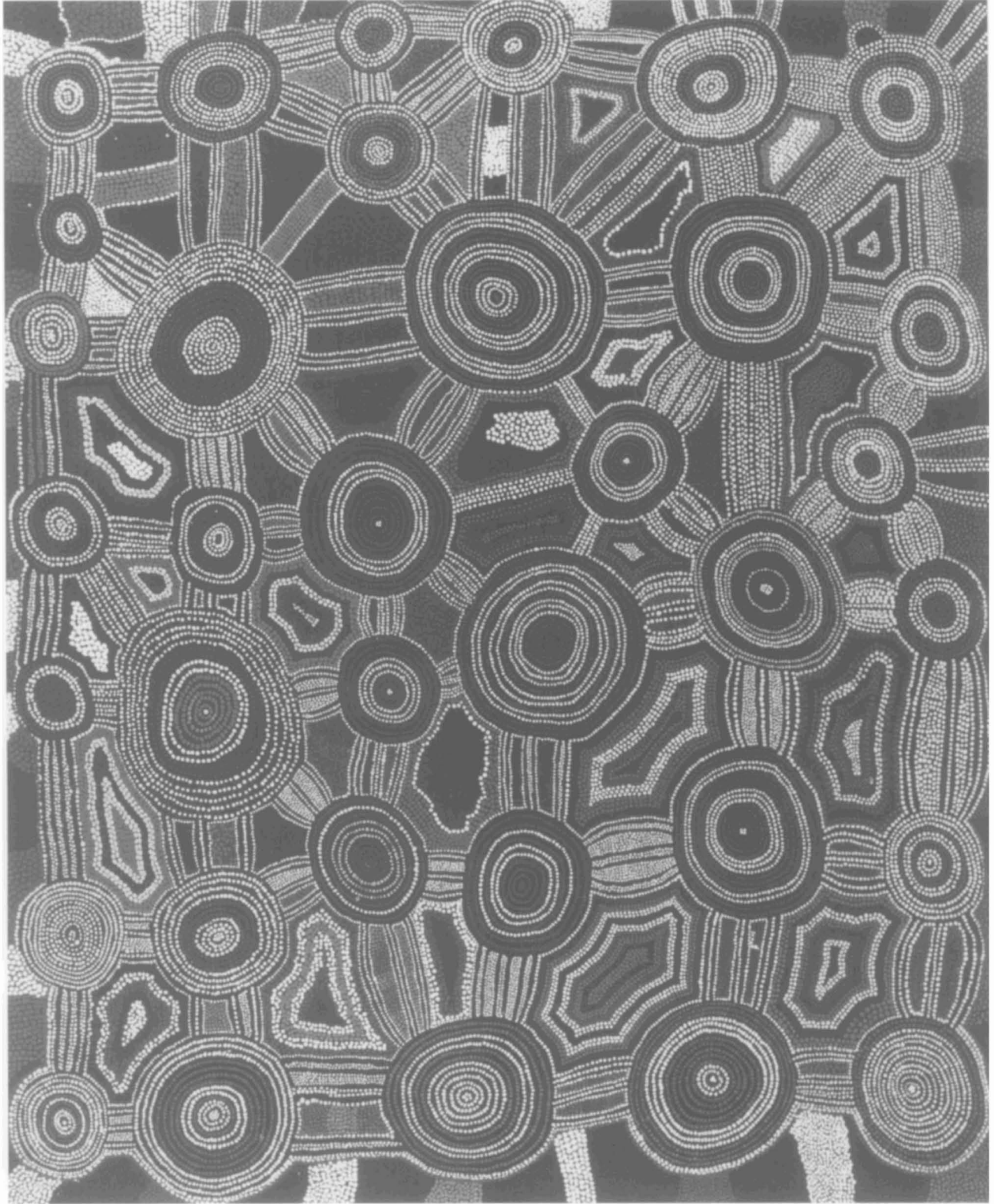


FIG. 9.25. TINGARRI (ANCESTRAL MEN) AT LAKE MCDONALD (MACDONALD), 1979. Acrylic on canvas painting made for sale by Uta Uta Jangala, Western Desert.

Size of the original: 187 × 154.5 cm. Photograph courtesy of the South Australian Museum, Adelaide. © Copyright courtesy Anthony Wallis, Aboriginal Artists Agency, Sydney.

much of the power. Religious authorities in Aboriginal society are always letting others know that what they are revealing is only part of something bigger.

The commercial art market has created a demand for Western Desert paintings that show more than small fragments of one or two Dreaming histories. Larger canvases, containing more of the different Dreamings in a particular landscape, fetch better prices. They also represent a further departure from the ceremonial origins of the designs themselves: Fred Myers notes that “one emergent form is the ‘map’ which represents a wide variety of Dreamings in the [Pintupi] painter’s country. . . . Traditionally, maps of a sort were drawn on the ground for communication of complex information, but I do not think there was a ceremonial context in which all of these stories were at once relevant and therefore incorporated into a single design.”<sup>95</sup>

#### Desert Sculptures: The Toas of Lake Eyre

I now turn to a class of objects that show typical Aboriginal desert iconographic techniques and styles, but that themselves were said to be designed to stand upright in the ground as indicators of place: the toas of the Lake Eyre region of South Australia. Lutheran missionary and collector J. G. Reuther (1861–1914) sold his collection to the South Australian Museum in 1907. There were 385 items of a single type known in the Diyari language as the toa, and these were the most extraordinary feature of his collection.<sup>96</sup> Toas are small sculptures, mostly fifteen to forty-five centimeters long, and most are based on a length of wood sharpened at the lower end (plate 20). They were restricted solely to the Lake Eyre region, and though Reuther’s fellow missionary Oskar Liebler collected some toas at the same location in the same period, objects of exactly this type are not reported for the Lake Eyre region by early observers other than the Lutheran missionaries. Old Aborigines alive in the 1960s when L. A. Hercus made detailed inquiries about toas had never heard of them.<sup>97</sup> They are also, therefore, known only from a single period in history.

According to Reuther:

To the Aborigine, toas are way-markers [or direction posts] and location-finders. Each toa indicates a particular locality according to its topographical character, and by its shape bears reference to the name of the place in question. From the colours [on the toas] the Aborigine [can] recognise the present whereabouts of his friends’ camp as concerning its [general] geographic formation, while head-pieces [or “crests”] on some of the toas help through their symbolism to determine the place-names more accurately. An Aborigine [can] decipher the relevant place-name from the toa. For this reason one can probably say with [some]

justification that the toa[s] are a [form of] Aboriginal “sign language.”

When Aborigines travel from one campsite to another, but expect friends or acquaintances to visit them within the next few days, a toa is made relevant to the present camp, informing the visitors that the [inhabitants] have moved for one reason or another to this or that place, [and] may be found at [such and such] a place. They are [then] traced to the spot, accordingly. . . .

A toa is stuck by its nether point [into the ground] in one of the unoccupied wurleys [shelters] of the camp, in order to protect it against wind and weather. Signs are engraved in the sand in front of the wurley, so that any visitor [will] know that he [can] obtain information from within.<sup>98</sup>

In virtually every instance the design of a toa symbolizes a named place in the eastern Lake Eyre region. It does this by symbolically referring, in most cases, to a certain group of natural features and to a mythological event believed to have taken place there.

Certain totems in this region were passed down from fathers to children.<sup>99</sup> These patrilineal totems, known in Diyari as one’s *pintharra*, were the plants, animals, or other things who, as mythological beings, moved about the landscape leaving traces of themselves and their activities in features such as trees, rocks, sand hills, and water holes. These beings were the Muramuras (Diyari term), the ancestral heroes and emblems of the landholding patrilineal clans. That is, a person’s country was inherited primarily based on his or her *pintharra* relationship to its mythological sites.<sup>100</sup>

95. Fred R. Myers, “Truth, Beauty, and Pintupi Painting,” *Visual Anthropology* 2 (1989): 163–95, esp. 182.

96. See the abstract from Reuther’s manuscript by Edward Stirling and Edgar R. Waite, “Description of Toas, or Australian Aboriginal Direction Signs,” *Records of the South Australian Museum* 1 (1919–21): 105–55; Jones and Sutton, *Art and Land* (note 24); and L. A. Hercus, “Just One Toa,” *Records of the South Australian Museum* 20 (1987): 59–69.

97. Hercus, “Just One Toa,” 61.

98. J. G. Reuther, *The Diari*, 13 vols., trans. Philipp A. Scherer, AIAS microfiche no. 2 (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1981), 12:1–2. The original is in German (unpublished); the words in brackets are augmentations by the translator. The account by H. J. Hillier, English schoolteacher and artist responsible for illustrating the Reuther collection, matches that of Reuther: H. J. Hillier, Letter to the Director of the Queensland Museum, dated 12 September 1916, and idem, Letter to the Director of the Queensland Museum, dated 27 September 1916, Petersburg, South Australia; both in the Queensland Museum Archives.

99. Reuther, *Diari*, vol. 11; A. P. Elkin, “Cult-Totemism and Mythology in Northern South Australia,” *Oceania* 5 (1934–35): 171–92; H. K. Fry, “Dieri Legends,” *Folk-lore* 48 (1937): 187–206, 269–87; and Ronald Murray Berndt, “A Day in the Life of a Dieri Man before Alien Contact,” *Anthropos* 48 (1953): 171–201.

100. People in the region also had matrilineal totems, but these, as



Reuther said he had noted down some three hundred ceremonial songs “that are woven into the legends,” and also that “corroborees [ceremonies] are the dramatized and descriptive representation of the life-story of the one-time muramuras.”<sup>101</sup> Thus to the extent that toas depict sites on mythological routes, they map in fragments the songlines of the Lake Eyre region.

It is possible that totemic and mythological designs typically used in ceremonial contexts in this region at some stage also became part of a practical sign system for wayfinding as Reuther suggested for the toas. The obscurity surrounding this particular question, and the allegation by one of Reuther’s contemporaries that the toas were a hoax, have added to their mystique as artifacts.<sup>102</sup>

For all their unique characteristics, toas do seem typical of much of classical Aboriginal culture, and the myths and place-names they referred to are certainly attested to independently by a number of sources. There are many reports in this same region of boomerangs or other wooden implements stuck in the ground, both in myths and in statements about magical or ceremonial acts.<sup>103</sup> Toas do bear visual resemblances to certain religious objects from the Lake Eyre region and from Arnhem Land, ceremonial poles from Central Australia, painted message sticks from Central Australia, and directional markers and carved message sticks from western Queensland.<sup>104</sup> Their supposed functions are effectively the same as those of directional markers once used in northeast Queensland and Victoria.<sup>105</sup> The use of color symbolism for specific types of stone or soil at the referent site makes toas rather similar to bark paintings (fig. 9.26). Their iconographic complexity, however, sets the toas apart from the simpler directional markers found elsewhere. Howard Morphy analyzed a large sample of toas in detail. He found that they were of three main types (fig. 9.27) and that the painted symbols on them fell into eight main groups.<sup>106</sup>

Toas may have been innovative extensions of a pre-existing tradition. But they also seem to have flourished and disappeared in something like a single generation. Toas are not equivalent to the *tjurunga* or sacred stones and boards of Central Australia. Accounts of sacred boards and stones exist for the Lake Eyre region, but they make no mention of toas.<sup>107</sup> T. G. H. Strehlow, renowned for the depth of his knowledge of Central Australian religion, saw no reason to doubt Reuther’s assertion that the toas were public objects.<sup>108</sup> In the 1980s and 1990s, however, a few Aboriginal people claimed they were secret-sacred objects and should be kept from public view.

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elsewhere in Australia (e.g., the Lake Woods region, Northern Territory) were not localized.

101. Reuther, *Diari*, 11:13–14 (note 98).

102. Jones and Sutton, *Art and Land*, 54–61 (note 24).

103. Reuther, *Diari* (note 98); George Horne and G. Aiston, *Savage Life in Central Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1924), 25–26; Elkin,

## CONCLUSION

Observers have long been struck by a contrast between the richness of the social and religious lives of Australian Aborigines and the often stark simplicity of their traditional foraging economy and technology. Classical Aboriginal culture concentrates on human relationships, or on how things lie in relation to each other, rather than on things themselves. Relationships between people (kinship, social organization, amity, conflict), and between people and place (homelands, sacred sites, mythology, songlines, topographic icons), form central concerns in such a tradition.

Aboriginal culture’s emphasis on an economy of knowledge and valued states of connection between people, rather than on accumulating excess production and freeing the individual from material dependency on others, does not make it ethereal. Hard and reliable topographic and natural resource knowledge, at least in the past, was the major factor standing between living Aboriginal people and the not very distant possibility of death from thirst, hunger, or exposure. Generally speaking, people gathered only enough food for the day’s requirements. Yet their emphasis on meaningful forms, and their general avoidance of fetishizing things that for others might become commodities in a money economy, ensures that it is

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“Cult-Totemism and Mythology,” 184–85 (note 99); and Ben Murray, interview by Philip Jones, Port Augusta, South Australia, cassette recording (South Australian Museum, Adelaide), 1985.

104. C. W. Nobbs, “The Legend of the Muramura Darana,” typescript (photocopy) (Adelaide, South Australian Museum [ca. 1985]); Warner, *Black Civilization*, pl. IIIb (note 26); Strehlow, *Aranda Traditions* (note 32); Thomas Worsnop, comp., *The Prehistoric Arts, Manufactures, Works, Weapons, etc., of the Aborigines of Australia* (Adelaide: Government Printer, 1897), 47–49; and Walter Edmund Roth, *Ethnological Studies among the North-West-Central Queensland Aborigines* (Brisbane: E. Gregory, Government Printer, 1897), 132–33, 136–38, and pl. XVIII.

105. Walter Edmund Roth, “North Queensland Ethnography, Bulletin No. 11,” *Records of the Australian Museum* 7 (1908–10): 74–107, esp. 82–84, and Howitt, *Native Tribes*, 722–23 (note 10).

106. Howard Morphy, “A Reanalysis of the Toas of the Lake Eyre Tribes of Central Australia: An Examination of Their Form and Function” (M. Phil. thesis, London University, 1972), and idem, “Schematisation, Meaning and Communication in Toas,” in *Form in Indigenous Art: Schematisation in the Art of Aboriginal Australia and Prehistoric Europe*, ed. Peter J. Ucko (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1977), 77–89.

107. See, for example, T. Vogelsang, “Ceremonial Objects of the Dieri Tribe, Cooper Creek, South Australia (Ochre Balls, Woven String Wrappers, and Pointing Sticks) Called the ‘Hearts of the Two Sons of the Muramura Darana,’” *Records of the South Australian Museum* 7 (1941–43): 149–50, and Horne and Aiston, *Savage Life*, 90, 112, 164 (note 103).

108. T. G. H. Strehlow, “The Art of Circle, Line, and Square,” in *Australian Aboriginal Art*, ed. Ronald Murray Berndt (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1964), 44–59, esp. 55.

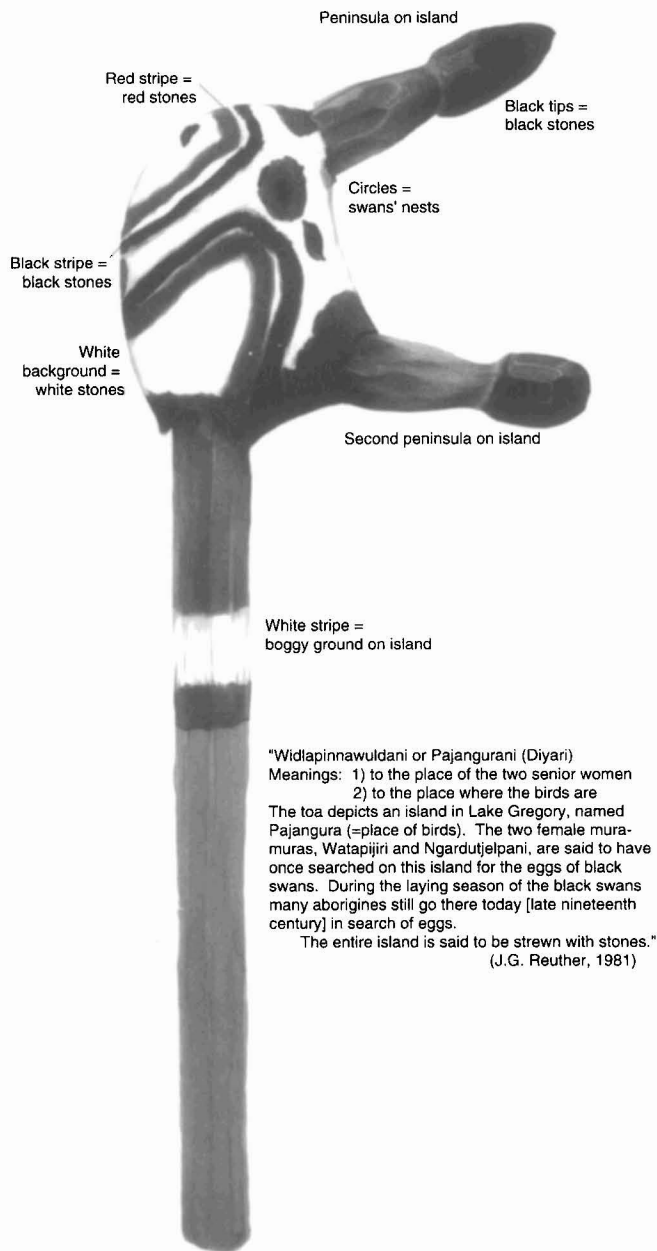


FIG. 9.26. LAKE GREGORY TOA, CA. 1904. This illustration of the Lake Gregory toa has Reuther's description of its mythic symbolism and topographic references. Ochers on wood, string, gypsum; from Killalpaninna Lutheran Mission, South Australia.

Height of the original: 40 cm. Photograph courtesy of the South Australian Museum, Adelaide (A6169). Annotations after Philip Jones and Peter Sutton, *Art and Land: Aboriginal Sculptures of the Lake Eyre Region* (Adelaide: South Australian Museum, 1986), 62.

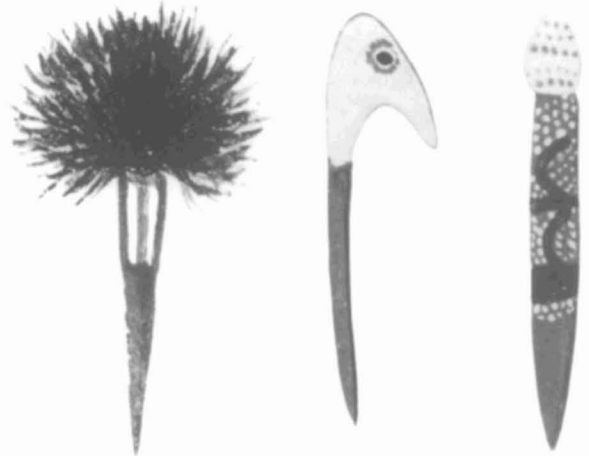


FIG. 9.27. TOA TYPES. The three examples, painted by H. J. Hillier, are based on Howard Morphy's three types. Type I (left) has a natural object or artifact (e.g., vegetation, bird feathers, human hair, teeth, bark, or wood splinters) attached to the head and may also have painted designs on the stem and the head. Type II (center) bears a molded or carved representation of some artifact or natural object (e.g., figures representing boomerangs, bodily ornaments, geographical features, parts of human or animal bodies such as hands, feet, legs, bird heads), which is either attached to the stem or constitutes the body of the sculpture itself. Type III (right) has the wooden stem and gypsum head painted with formal designs using the same range of symbols as the paintings on toas of types I and II, but there are no attached, molded, or carved representational objects.

From Philip Jones and Peter Sutton, *Art and Land: Aboriginal Sculptures of the Lake Eyre Region* (Adelaide: South Australian Museum, 1986), 63.

the enduring patterns of designs and their often sacred and multilayered meanings, not the objects on which these designs are placed, that mostly attract notions of high value in classical Aboriginal practice.

I have, however, viewed a good deal of the material above through the lens of certain kinds of objects, and through individual objects. Many of them are held by institutions in which fetishizing objects is integral to the accumulation-oriented culture in which they have evolved. Most of these objects endure only because professionals, usually non-Aborigines, work to make sure they do not rot or get used for firewood on a cold night. It is true, of course, that few readers of this text will ever see the objects themselves, apart from the pictures I have chosen to include here. For many, this will be enough.

And here we find perhaps some unexpectedly deep commonality between the industrial mind and classical Aboriginal thought. Our sense of control of the subject matter—whether it is topography or images of it—depends in large part on our capacity to reduce its chaotic reality

to schemata, to reductive images at some remove from the ultimate object of attention. In that sense readers may interpret this chapter as itself a map. Especially in a case like this, the efficacy of words may depend on their capacity to evoke visualizing rather than ratiocination. Thus it remains true at a certain level that (as Aboriginal people themselves frequently suggest) for non-Aborigines

who struggle to comprehend Aboriginal images of place, to see is to understand.<sup>109</sup>

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109. Morphy, "‘Now You Understand’" (note 77), and W. E. H. Stanner, *White Man Got No Dreaming: Essays, 1938–1973* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1979), 278–79.