

Picturing relations: Groote Eylandt barks symposium

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Signs of Contact: Groote Eylandt rock art and cross-cultural exchange

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INTRODUCTION & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to begin by acknowledging the Wurrundjeri People of the Kulin Nations, the traditional owners of the land we are on today. I thank Joanna Bose and the Ian Potter Museum of Art for their invitation to participate in today's forum. I would also like to acknowledge the participation of Dr Annie Clarke, of the University of Sydney, who although she is unable to join us today is very much a co-author of today's presentation.

It is under the auspices of a broader archaeological project initiated and developed by Annie Clarke that I came to be involved in the recording of Groote Eylandt rock art. To give some context to this research the project's aims may best be defined as contact archaeology with a community approach. In short, we are interested in examining the archaeological signature of art production to get a better understanding of the past history of cross-cultural engagements between Indigenous Groote Eylandt and non-Indigenous outsiders. How this history is communicated through rock art is something I will address later in the paper. Following the principles of a community approach, various members of the Groote Eylandt community have played an integral part in its progress.

In addition to giving permission to undertake this research various individuals were instrumental in shaping of our survey methodology and in the day to day recording of the rock art landscape. Special mention must be made of Polly Mamarika and her husband who passed away last year, Claude Mamarika and his family, Mary Amagula, and Hazel Lalara and Isaac BaraBara for their significant collaboration in carrying out this work. The Anindilyakwa Land Council and the communities of Angurugu and Umbakumba also deserve acknowledgement. I would like to note that the following images were produced with permission of the Groote Eylandt custodians of these sites and none contain restricted images.

GENERAL SUMMARY OF GROOTE EYLANDT ROCK ART

The Groote Eylandt archipelago consists of over one hundred islands, ranging in size from small rocky outcrops to substantial islands capable of sustaining a permanent human population. Throughout these islands there are rock shelters and caves where Indigenous people have created paintings that reflect and respond to their experiences of the world.

Painted over many generations, today these rock art sites appear as a complex palimpsest of past activities, a unique archive of the way the Anindilyakwa people represented their land and their lives, their ideas and beliefs. This record also offers a unique pictorial insight into the changing environmental, social, technological and economic conditions within which these lives were lived. One intriguing aspect of the Groote Eylandt rock art record is the depictions of non-Indigenous outsiders. These paintings provide a powerful visual archive of how Indigenous people chose to represent their encounters with other cultural groups.

The map illustrates the location of a number of places that I will be mentioning today. They are focal points of the rock art investigation and the source of many the images I show today. I draw your attention to Yantarrnga (Central Hill) and Salt Lake, towards the centre right of the image. This landscape incorporates the site complexes of Angwurrkburna and Yantarrnga (Central Hill) and it is where we spent many weeks camping and recording with Polly Mamarika and her husband who passed away. The second area is Dalimba Bay further to the southeast, where we

camped with Claude Mamarika and his family, and where a series of text excavations and rock art recordings were carried out, namely at Ayuwawa, Andirra and Marnkgala.

Our work is part of a much longer history of Groote Eylandt rock art recording which has been described in some form or another ever since the early 19th century. Indeed one of the earliest rock art recordings made in Australia, is from Chasm island, where a series of sketches and watercolours were made by William Westall, the illustrator aboard Flinders 1802-03 voyage of the Investigator.

From the recordings we and others have made, we know that Groote Eylandt rock art is essentially a wet pigment tradition, consisting largely of paintings and stencils. To my knowledge there are only one or two abrasions and a small number of dry pigment drawings. The pigments used in the creation of rock art comprise a range of colours, including various shades of red and yellow, as well as brown, black, white and other shades such as orange, mauve and pink which may be specially mixed. These pigments were ground and mixed with water and sometimes a starchy liquid obtained from orchids. Many of the ochres were available locally but some red pigments were also acquired through trade with people of mainland Arnhem Land.

The various shades of red are the most dominantly represented colours in the rock art. In his landmark analysis of 1960 McCarthy noted that over 2,000 paintings or 87% of the recorded rock art comprised reddish pigments. By way of contrast, black pigment, in the form of either charcoal or manganese was found in only 12 paintings. This is clearly an interesting pattern when we consider the unique black ground by which so many Groote Eylandt bark paintings are distinguished.

When we begin to look at the way in which the palette was used we see a diversity of styles. Some forms appear in the solid monochrome silhouette, such as this stingray. While others are composed through the repetition of line or the combination of an outline with linear infill. In some instances stippling or short strokes of paint create a sense of texture that is appears inspired by the subject itself, for example the fur of the wallaby, the scales of a fish or the quills of an echidna such as that shown here. In other instances such allusions to the texture or bodily surface also carry a decorative appeal.

Where more than one colour pigment was applied within a single painting there appears to be a clear preference for colour combinations which produce a strong degree of contrast, for example red with white or red with yellow. Moreover, one of the most frequent stylistic approaches of bichromatic painting was to outline in one colour a solid shape in another. This works not only to emphasize the shape of the form but to give the image an added impact and vibrancy. Variations on this style include the incorporation of bold striped forms or fine linear detail.

On the one hand these effects of illumination or emboldening of form through outline allow the image to stand out against the uneven tonal background of granular rock, mineral staining and earlier paintings. Yet the play of colour and line also lends the image a vibrancy that is undoubtedly linked to the subjects' importance within Groote Eylandt society, economy and cosmology.

As the images thus far have indicated, Groote Eylandt rock art shows a strong preference for figurative representations. And from what we have observed there is in fact very little in the way of geometric shapes or abstracted form. Of the figurative subjects we find a variety of marine and terrestrial fauna, with a particular emphasis on dolphins, wallabies, lizards, turtles and fish. Other common motifs include birds, canoes and human figures, which are often depicted in groups of 2 or more.

Despite the schematic nature of many of the human figures, they capture a strong sense of gesture and animation, a feature which is carried through in the bark painting. An interesting point concerning the representation of human or anthropomorphic figures is that they too were

frequently arranged in groups sometimes with other motifs to form compositions that may incorporate combined perspectives of planar and profile views.

Many of these compositions possess a distinctively narrative quality, which is particularly evocative in the fishing scenes that occur again and again within the rock art record. These scenes, like many of the other motifs, display a number of pictorial conventions in the way the subject is rendered. In the case of dolphins, for example, the iconographic representation consists of a profile view with the distinctive dorsal fin, flippers, tail and bottle nose. The question of an emergent iconography may be addressed further when we consider the rock art of culture contact. Before doing so I will give a brief history of this process.

SUMMARY CONTACT HISTORY OF GROOTE EYLANDT

For the Anindilyakwa the cross-cultural past encompassed a multitude of experiences with different cultures. Yet primarily, the people of Groote Eylandt experienced contact through two distinctive groups of outsiders, Indonesian fishermen and European explorers/settlers. The first series of cross-cultural encounters had begun by at least AD 1650, possibly earlier, and involved a seasonal bartering relationship with Indonesian fishing fleets from southern Sulawesi. The fishermen, now more commonly known as Macassans (Macassar was the major port of origin for many of the boats), came to northern Australia in search of commodities to sell in the marketplaces of island southeast Asia and beyond. The main focus of Asian commercial interest in the region was trepang (*bêche de mer*), but pearls, pearl shell, turtle shell, sandalwood, tin, manganese and dried shark tails were also sought after by the trepangers.

The advent of regular, seasonal visits by Macassans established a process of cultural interactions that left its mark on indigenous social institutions and practices as well as in the material record. Macassan contact saw the introduction of new items of material culture including metal axes, knives, and fishhooks, pottery, glass, harpoon technology and dugout canoes. Despite this particular cross-cultural engagement ending in 1907, when the Australian Government outlawed Macassan visits to the north Australian coast, substantial evidence relating to the indigenous experiences of Macassan contact remain. The imprint of this cross-cultural exchange can also be traced through the subject matter of indigenous songs, stories, and ceremonies and in the naming of local lands and place through the adoption of Macassan loan words into Indigenous languages. The inclusion of Macassan items such as sails, dug-out canoes and flags as clan totems and the continuing use of Macassan personal names are all indicators of the depth of the relationships forged between Indigenous people and the Macassans.

The second series of cross-cultural encounters Anindilyakwa people experienced involved an initially sporadic yet intensifying engagement with European explorers and which eventuated in the establishment of permanent settler societies that continue to this day. This process began in 1623 AD when Dutch vessels (*the Pera* and *the Arnhem*) sailed around the Arnhem Land coast, followed by Matthew Flinders visit of 1802-1803. However, it was not until 1921 that there was a permanent European presence on Groote Eylandt with the establishment of the Church Missionary Society mission. Since that time, European-Australian fishermen visited for sometimes lengthy periods and the non-Indigenous population living permanently on the island swelled significantly with the establishment of a mining community in the 1960s.

CONTACT ROCK ART ON GROOTE EYLANDT

So what is the visual record of these encounters? How did the Anindilyakwa people of the past picture their contact relationships? Both Macassans and Europeans made their way into the lives and cultural consciousness of Groote Eylandt people via the sea. For a society with such a strong maritime knowledge and world view, it is perhaps no coincidence that the rock art record of these interactions is focussed on the depiction of boats. More intriguing is that boat images are, for the most part, the primary contact subjects recorded in Groote Eylandt rock art.

Paintings of praus (or *perahu* - Macassan sailing vessels) are amongst the most visually outstanding motifs of Groote Eylandt rock art. They are large, multicoloured and impressively

detailed motifs which place an emphasis on the crew, cargo and technological features of the boat. With the exception of stingrays, they are the only subjects, that we are aware of, that are consistently illustrated in what may be referred to as a kind of 'X-ray' style, where an impression of the internal detail of the subject is revealed.

The configuration of the masts and sails, the decking, the hull structure, the rudders, and the internal storage of dugout canoes and cooking pots shows an intimacy with the boat, its internal geography, and implicitly its crew. Groote Eylandt artists emphasised the social dimensions of the prau through integrating human figures within the very structural composition of the praus.

Depicted in various states of activity, holding onto the ropes; climbing the mast; hoisting the sail and fishing off the back of the boat, human figures imbue the praus with a dynamism and their placement symbolically entwines the social with the technical features of the prau. This emphasis on social action is particularly interesting because we know from various sources (including archaeological evidence, oral history and historical sources) that just as the Macassans engaged with Aboriginal people on land, Aboriginal people travelled on board the praus with the Macassans.

The Anindilyakwa language incorporates words for many of the praus' technological components and there is a suite of features which are consistently rendered in representations of praus. And importantly the representation of these attributes reflect a knowledge of how the prau functioned. The characteristic shape of the hull, view of the hold and representation of human figures are all notable features. And as the diagram illustrates four particular technological attributes may be considered key elements of the prau iconography:

- the rudders;
- the mast, most commonly tripod with horizontal struts;
- the Y-shaped rope beneath the sail and other rigging, and
- the open sail

We may begin to think about these attributes as a kind of core structure associated with the representation of Macassan praus. The use of consistent design attributes allows the paintings to be recognised as representations of praus yet the variation in application of these features also create unique prau depictions. While there appears to be a definite schema for the representation of praus, in some respects they appear less stylised than the praus we see depicted in the bark paintings.

By comparison with Macassan praus, other boats in the recorded rock-art are generally less frequent and less elaborate in colour and attention to detail. Sailboats, presumably of European origin are rendered schematically and as many are produced in dry pigment drawings they can be difficult to discern.

Prominent features may include masts, sails and a rudder, and there is a marked absence of human form. To our eyes, these European style sailboats appear more as unique and individuated expressions rather as particular instantiations of an embedded iconography. As such these images may very well depict specific historical figures or encounter events. One example is a painting considered to denote the Mission boat the Holly.

CONCLUSION

To quickly conclude, the rock art, bark paintings and other living cultural practices demonstrate that just as Macassans and Europeans have become a part of Anindilyakwa lives, histories and memories their representations have become a part of Groote Eylandt art. The ways in which Anindilyakwa artists chose to depict the presence of others, largely through their boats, reflects a remarkable ability to distinguish difference across a common ground and to accommodate and engage change within the continuities of their own narrative and visual culture traditions.