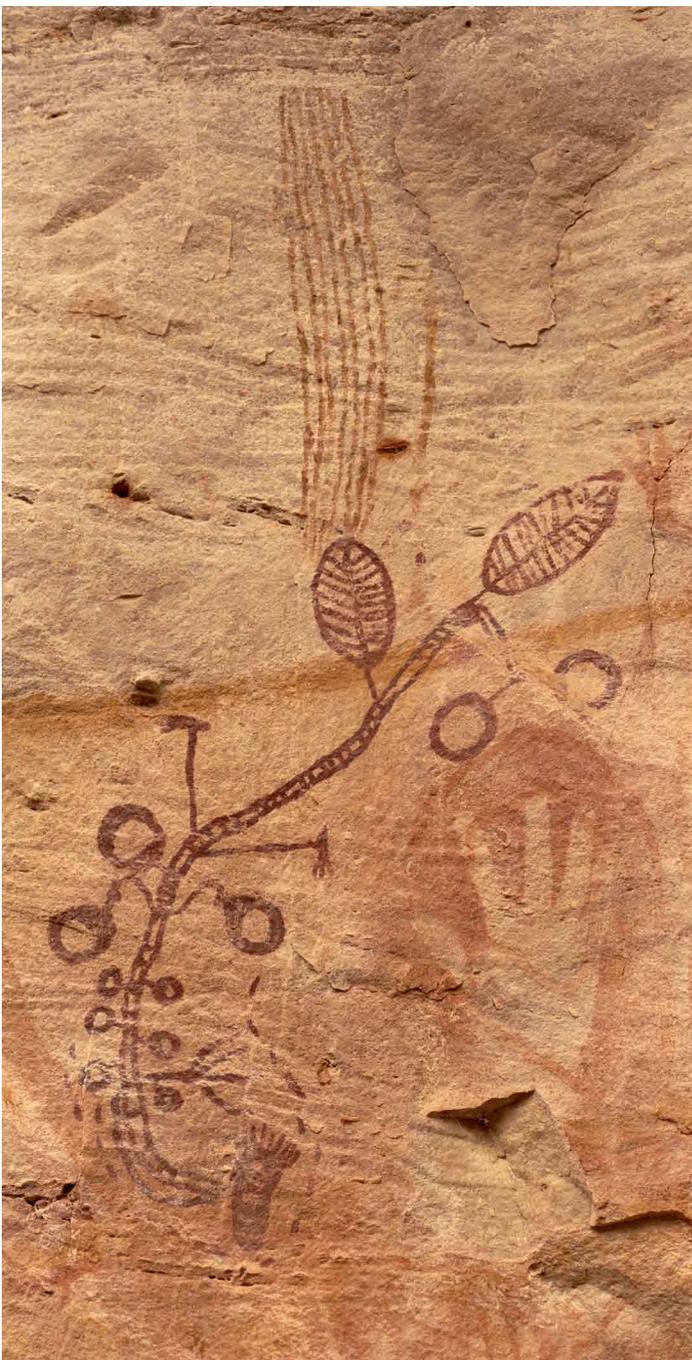




KEYWORDS: Kimberley – Ngarinyin – Gwion (artist, inventor) – Wunan (law and land tenure)

## GWION ARTISTS AND WUNAN LAW: THE ORIGIN OF SOCIETY IN AUSTRALIA\*

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**Abstract.** Key aspects of the Gwion rock art tradition are threefold: the historic origin of Wunan law as evidence of a society started by an artist; methods of the art tradition recorded on film and its enduring role as graphic legal documents within a cultural network under Wunan law; and its future as a meaningful legacy of fine art under Ngarinyin munnumburra conservation and research management within their native title region according to native title and customary law.

\* Images of Ngarinyin persons and ancestral sites are reproduced in this paper; persons of Aboriginal descent may decide not to view the contents of this publication.

**Figure 1.** Guloi tree at Alyaguma site in southern Galeru.ngarri district. The guloi (native plum) is iconic of education in Wunan law. Variations of this motif are reproduced at several other locations. This combination of visual metaphors for stages of education throughout life describes the pathway of learning law. Beginning from the individual's foot at the roots of family blood, social identity grows from the lines converging to form one straight root of Wunan law. Then paths link circles of education places rising through youth and adult phases until reaching two feet looking down; they signify the binary system of social knowledge established by Wodoi and Jungun who initiated the Wunan moiety marriage system. From this elevated position of understanding of kinship divisions and connections, the mature person must be devoted to educating the next generation represented by new fruit of guloi plums, ripening when monsoonal rains fall (seen descending at top of image).



**Figure 2.** Ungudman and Banggal beneath the matriarch Algi at Alyaguma southern Galeru.ngarri dambun immediately after initiating the Pathway Project in 1992. Ungudman is the ancestral name of the late Paddy Wamma from Morrongo Morrongo dambun (district). He was an expert naturalist and senior munnumburra of Jungun skin within the Amalar moiety whose kinship identity extensions include native tobacco or wamma, the source of his public name. Banggal is the ancestral name of the late David Mowaljarlai OA from Brrejirad dambun. He was a respected advocate, cultural translator and published educator as a senior munnumburra of Wodoi skin within the Ornad moiety whose kinship identity extensions include jirad (native hibiscus) and the Gwion Gwion bird.

#### GWION artists = WUNAN law

Gwion rock art is a unique human residue preserving the resonance of ideas about Wunan law and ancestral identity. Gwion rock art is static or animated and single or group anthropomorphic red to black paintings from miniature to metres in scale. Having evolved during a long tradition, the variety of human imagery ranges from simple stick figures having limbs with three digits during the earliest epoch, into attired human profiles with limbs anatomically detailed in silhouette. The fully developed Gwion human image displays emblematic extensions to the human head and limbs to indicate kinship connections to country that form a distinct localised social identity within Wunan law.

Wunan law forms a social structure connecting all people and knowledge to country making social identity a prime subject regulating the Gwion tradition. To define graphically individual identity connected with country, Gwion artists paint emblems of specific local flora and fauna combined with extra motifs of attire and accoutrements to mirror social identity extended into country. The salient graphic motif of even elaborately attired figures often portrayed in group scenes of social ceremony and exchanges controlled by Wunan law is a significant headdress form (Ngarinyin: mudurra). These extensions to the head are often elongate, but other shapes refer to finely structured coiffure forms emblematic of localised ancestral identity, such as wings of specific birds and ears of mammals etc.

Due to its traditional existence as ancestral evi-

dence, all Gwion rock art is considered *mamaa*; that is, of a secret and sacred status. As example, for the Ngarinyin, each painting is a kind of guarantee of some immortality, because they can see and touch extremely venerable rock art produced by ancestors of their family. The authentic public term 'Gwion' translates as 'artist and inventor'.

The Pathway Project began in 1992 as a collaboration when senior Ngarinyin *munnumburra* decided that they must document and reveal the provenance of Gwion rock art and their culture based in Wunan law to secure native title in Australian law. Initiated beneath a unique visual metaphor for education of Wunan law, the *guloi* native plum tree icon at Alyaguma, they started recording *junjun* ('evidence') on their *dulwan nimindi* ('pathway of knowledge') (Figs 1, 2).

The evidence collected during the Pathway Project was recorded on site, in front of the paintings, and under the supervision of the four senior Ngarinyin *munnumburra* who inform this paper; Ngarjno, Ungudman, Banggal and Nyawarra.<sup>1</sup> These senior experts used many conversations to reveal meanings inherent in several key Gwion paintings and stone arrangements, effectively transforming the content of painted documents into film documents. From the resulting media they authored the first book devoted to Gwion rock art; this book was the subject of a

<sup>1</sup> Ngarinyin is the largest and central language group of the plateau region of the northwest Kimberley, Australia (Horton 1996). Their neighbours, the Worrora and the Wunambal-Gaambera, share the same Wanjina-Wungurr Law (*Wunan*).



**Figure 3.** *Yandama, the famous Gwion who invented the nyarndu ('spearthrower') seen in detail of the kangaroo-hunting icon at Alyaguma, southern Galery.ngarri dambun.*

separate judgment when it became evidence for the Wanjina Wunggurr Willingin native title claim giving the claimants possession of all Wanjina and Gwion rock art 'against the world' (Ngarjno et al. 2000; Strelein 2006).<sup>2</sup>

In brief, their evidence demonstrates that the visionary artist Wibalma created one sacred object of Justice that was the original catalyst for Wunan law. Being fixed to country by law became the primary motive for Gwion artists to produce the majority of human images. Gwion represent the first society to portray themselves under customary law as experienced today by Nyawarra and the Ngarinyin people he represents. 'Gwion people who started this law... long time belong to Ngarinyin country. Old people and I got to hold that thing today' (Ngarjno cited in text to the Musée de Préhistoire des Gorges du Verdon exhibition 2010).

From the Ngarinyin perspective, Gwion art is a graphic form of legal document, painted on stone rather than written, which confirms their tenure over ancestral land. Future research into Gwion motifs must acknowledge the historical social relationships organised by Wunan kinship and prior indigenous cultural ownership by using the correct nomenclature of places and subjects. Conservation and access must be controlled by Aboriginal experts to provide cultural connections with the Gwion artists and to sustain the experience and values of the rock art through

<sup>2</sup> It was not just among *all* the evidence but the subject of a separate judgement influencing the decision giving the claimants possession of all Wanjina and Gwion rock art 'against the world'. This legal status has been confirmed by the Federal Court. This should be of particular interest to rock art researchers.

knowledge of Wunan law. Knowledge of the Wunan only becomes properly explained in intense discussion among *munnumburra* after days of conversational build-up, focusing with more clarity each day into a subject while intellectually participating in what is called *worri unbin* ('flowing words'). The resolution and destination of these Wunan conversations are crucial to understanding something of the content and context of Gwion paintings.

The archaic Yandama painting (Fig. 3) invokes the earliest nomadic era, in which more simple human figures are often distinguished by three digits, reflecting the time when the original nomadic clans were identified with bird names. Yandama the hunter spearing his prey is revered graphic evidence of the actual inventor of the *nyarndu* ('spearthrower') documented in paint on rock at Alyaguma in southern Galery.ngarri *dambun* ('inherited districts'). Due to the outstanding significance of the icon the entire Alyaguma location is often referred to as 'Yandama' as is another site marked with a stone circle and pile of oven stones for cooking kangaroo in honour of Yandama.

### **Introduction to the Wunan:**

#### **listen and learn from *munnumburra***

The genesis of Wunan as an enduring social order was one work of art, an essential sculptural form of an ethical concept — Justice. A meeting of clan groups was a response to and consequence of the creation of this *maya.ngarri* Manjilarri (the 'sacred object of Justice') created by Wibalma (an historical personage)<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Not a 'Dreaming being': this personage resides in the historical memory of the Ngarinyan. Further the term 'Dreaming' has many inappropriate colonial connotations;



**Figure 4.** Aerial view of the stone table at Dududu.ngarri. Top of aerial image is north with a stone arrangement approximately fifty metres across. The Kimberley hosts known as Kamali were tribes with nomadic bird names and remain represented by seventeen named stones encircling the table. All the visiting tribes from the 'sunrise' regions to the east, from northern coast to central desert, form two long lines of jallala — signal stones. Stones arranged in circles and positioned west of the table represent coastal tribes and southern tribes.

who exemplifies the term of Munga.nunga for 'artist as visionary'.

(Further discussions with the senior expert Ngarjno, while together at the law table of Dududu.ngarri in 1994, reminded me of what Ngarinyin knowledge has been lost and ignored in recent years. To reflect his portrait of Wibalma, I could offer a comparison with the sculptor Brancusi. Brancusi made refined essential abstractions of animal forms and the human head, whereas Wibalma created essential abstractions of ethics. Detailed discussion of sacred objects must not be made public to a random audience, but a simplified educational version of the origin of Wunan can be presented here.)

Being attracted by his charismatic reputation as a maker of sacred objects, Wibalma was visited by two heroes of the nomadic epoch — the clan leaders Wodoi and Jungun. They ventured to liberate something for 'all the people' and Wibalma eventually agreed knowledge of his 'essence of justice' should be shared. News of this attracted leaders of the nomadic peoples from the distant inland deserts, eastern Arnhem Land and all across northwestern Australia to gather in the Kimberley to discuss justice. Wibalma's powerful sacred form of Justice was so influential in focussing minds on the idea that it led to a social cohesion unique in world history as this conference installed Wunan laws over land and marriage. The implications of this historic event and the role of an artist as a catalyst for social evolution are implicit in the Ngarinyin evidence as recently recognised in the Quinson exhibition in France in 2010.

The nomadic groups from the Kimberley and as far afield as Uluru and eastern Arnhem Land gathered to witness the sacred object created by Wibalma. In

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it suggests childlike fantasy and a complete lack of any chronology in events, thereby installing myth to replace all Aboriginal history. It was used in response to poor translations particularly between missionaries, police and pastoralists and others, and has no place in 2013.

conference around the stone table at Dududu.ngarri, now an extensive stone arrangement site (Fig. 4), they reached a consensus to end the nomadic era by fixing people to country in perpetuity. Visitors approached the Wunan table in order to announce homeland titles and take their oath of agreement by eating native plum. Their positions in sequence from close to far are marked by two long lines of stones extending eastwards away from the table; one reached into the central deserts as far as the Warlpiri and the other northeast beyond Port Keats into Arnhem Land. The Yolgnu of today also preserve the dual moiety system initiated by Wodoi and Jungun and followed by the Ngarinyin. The Wunan table is not some exclusively local 'tribal' 'dreaming' legend but openly acknowledges by its composition the participation of many widespread peoples in one historic gathering.

The historical narrative of the Wunan embedded in the Gwion rock art imagery speaks to the origin of a united history of social evolution across the Kimberley and beyond. On return to their distant places, other peoples adopted the Wunan homelands concept and honoured the cross-marriage agreement between Wodoi and Jungun. They would exchange each other's blood through their offspring, thus originating a moiety kinship system that is the very foundation of many Aboriginal cultures.<sup>4</sup> Once life became sedentary, a common trading network developed, linking numerous language groups, and embraced about one third of the Australian continent.

Listeners to a recording of ongoing *worri-unbin* conversations among *munnumburra* will feel the strength of intellectual rigour in the real Wunan talk. The activity of Wodoi and Jungun was discussed much more than just the two 'mates' who liberated the Wunan sacred object of Justice — they were competitors engaged in duels of wit and intrigue. As

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<sup>4</sup> These moiety kinship systems became very influential as a core subject of early anthropology and are indispensable to describing cultural objects and rock art.

comrades they also influenced the landscape with their tracks like two great meandering cleared electric power lines reaching across much spreading savannah woodland with independent purpose.

The original Wunan conference was hosted by the Kimberley ancestors of the Ngarinyin as the Kamali, a confederacy of seventeen nomadic clans all with bird titles reflecting mobility. The Kamali are still marked by seventeen stones encircling the stone table at Dududu.ngarri and each bird name is always proclaimed during visits. Once they adopted Wunan moiety relationships with distinct titles and symbols, Kamali returned to their sandstone country and marked each new homeland with its new local identity. These new identities signify each of over forty *dambun* that subdivide the country under Wunan kinship law over land. As a result of this sedentary shift with its strict delineation in connections to country, Wunan law became the key motive for the Gwion rock art tradition. Today, many Gwion images are traditional documents — with legal force — in themselves relating to their specific location and ancestral significance. The patchwork of country with resident populations representing either one or other of two moiety kinship 'skins' of people acts as a binary distribution of resources and language across the Kimberley region.

The complex social order of the Wunan required a great variety of extensions to the human form (as depicted in the profile motifs) for Gwion artists to reflect identity as a personal relationship to inherited country. Therefore Wunan restrictions to local identity connecting person and place in perpetuity are the key to reading most Gwion images.

All Gwion paintings reflect Wunan laws in a complex variety of ways. Apart from personal images of family identity that signify ancestral connections to local flora and fauna, artists also recorded their history though millennia producing numerous scenes of cultural events but negligible scenes of conflict. Many past conflicts were resolved at numerous sites of peacemaking still known and celebrated as part of Wunan history. But as a reflection of perpetual land tenure under Wunan there is virtually no evidence for wars of invasion and territorial conquest except for raids for various reasons or temporary incursions to punish perceived sacrilegious behaviour. Some paintings imply ritual activity that may not be discussed in public and that any unlicensed exposure of could lead to violent punishment.

In general, a sedentary society is illustrated by the Gwion; customary Wunan law regulated all marriage, land tenure and trade.

The surviving *munnumburra* — who gave us their evidence — continue the Gwion rock art tradition as custodians with ancestral connections in Wunan law. For visiting researchers to ignore the Wunan map assumes and effectively asserts 'art nullius' and will result in work empty of meaning and history

(McNiven 2011). The value of future research will be determined by the breadth of perspective of studies that take into account local criteria of taxonomy and spiritual connections to flora and fauna, whose essential forms influence many graphic details as significant extensions in Gwion paintings, such as that painted in 1999 by Nyawarra (below).

In 500 CE, the Chinese art scholar Hsieh Ho wrote, 'There have always been good and bad paintings ... in art, however, the terms ancient and modern have no place'. Much later, in 1923, Pablo Picasso said during an interview, 'To me there is no past or future in art. If a work of art cannot always live in the present it must not be considered at all. The art of the Greeks or the Egyptians, of the great painters who lived in other times, is not an art of the past, perhaps it is more alive today than it ever was'. Gwion artists have left an intriguing record in the ancient tradition of their fine art, but even more durable and perhaps more universal are their ideas enshrined in Wunan law. Conceptual and practical knowledge as the key currency of a democratic society is recognised as the primary source of social cohesion and acts as a stimulus for the imagination, for both technical and cultural invention and environmental and social stability. Past art living today is very important for the Ngarinyin and many other Aboriginal groups throughout Australia.

Descriptions of Gwion art depend upon languages evolved through the binary structure of the Wunan system of territory and identification with flora and fauna by division into two moieties, as it is with neighbours. Wunan maps the known locations of each rock art image, and it incorporates numerous linking pathways across the cultural network formed by generations of the Jenagi Jenagi ('artists as messengers' — below). Ngarinyin is the only valid basis of nomenclature of Gwion rock art; it preserves the historic provenance of the images.

Interwoven within the durable fabric of permanent occupation and relationship to land are some actions and events that form layers reflecting cultural influences, such as the exchange of sacred objects. Rock art with historical narratives for inter-generational communication exists across many generations in the Gwion tradition, but the associated sacred objects express the more abstract essence of ethics as invaluable and guiding concepts. Artists aware of these intellectual realms produced paintings that only can be understood most deeply as ancestral evidence. Sacred objects distributed across the Wunan cultural network, however, acted as a public fountain of ideas, and are known as *maya.ngarri* ('sacred objects of the people'), which demonstrates the cultural influences of Wunan across to other regions.

As a result of this sedentary shift with its strict delineation in connections to country, Wunan law then became the key motive for the Gwion rock art tradition. Today, many Gwion images are traditional documents — with legal force — in themselves relating



Figure 5. Image of sacred object exchange in north Galeru. ngarri dambun district. (The image follows the convex surface of the shelter wall.)

to their specific location and ancestral significance.

The evolving complex social order of the Wunan increasingly required Gwion artists to invent graphic extensions to the human profile so as to reflect kinship identity as a localised relationship to inherited country. Therefore Wunan restrictions to local identity connecting person and place in perpetuity are the key to reading most Gwion images.

Sacred objects were distributed around the Wunan cultural network to reach other regions, however, as a cross-cultural broadcast of ideas often involving laws. They may be known as *maya.ngarri* ('sacred objects of the people') for their nourishing influence of ethics through ritual procedure, and are the specific art form of Jenagi Jenagi ('artists as messengers'). The relatively constrained estates delimited under Wunan restricted casual travel, so that cultural passports evolved to accommodate the exchange of sacred objects, giving rise to the role of 'artist as messenger' (Jenagi Jenagi). Cultural concepts and ethical laws that circulated widely in Wunan networks inevitably entered into the Kimberley, just as some originated there. Most exchanged sacred objects (*maya.ngarri*) were not possessed exclusively but distributed for some social influence acquired on certain occasions demanding elaborate apparel sometimes illustrated in Gwion group scenes.

An example of wider social communications through the 'artist as messenger' is recorded by one group scene now becoming difficult to distinguish beneath a skin of silica that suggests considerable antiquity (Fig. 5). Here we view the exchange of a 'cross-structured' *maya.ngarri* from one person to another at the head of a line of future recipients.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> 'Cross-structures': that is, made by joining a horizontal to a vertical piece; some structures serve as an armature for further additions to the framework to complete the

It is always worth remembering that the person holding the *maya.ngarri* during the exchange is referred to as being *molu* ('man in the middle') so, as things come to you, you must pass them on. The descriptor '*molu*' is an appropriate one for modern researchers who carry information that does not belong to them, thereby accepting the responsibility for handing it on to the next generation intact and not claiming knowledge for themselves. Selfishness is frowned upon by *munnumburra* following Wunan protocol; and this is demonstrated by their generosity in public education about their culture through publications and international exhibitions in film and photography.

In summary, Wunan law was brought to life by one artist — the celebrated *munga.nunga*, Wibalma. This is probably one of the few societies in the world that begins with an artist and not a warrior, king, queen or warlord. The 'artist-visionary' Wibalma created a sacred object of Justice as the catalyst to inspire an enduring social order under law — Wunan. The Ngarinyin evidence should be acknowledged as the basis for a new paradigm in the disciplines of art history, archaeology and anthropology, and indeed Australian History (Glowczewski 1988, 2013; Glowczewski and Henry 2011).

Legal identity with country under Wunan alone did not embrace or express all of life's big questions for the Ngarinyin and their neighbours. Human curiosity inspired a complex cosmology around natural elements inside country associated with ancestral origins that are expressed through icons that are, in turn, associated with permanent sources of life-giving water (Wanjina images). Only from Wanjina comes the *wungud* ('essence of life') giving vital energy to all living things.

#### Introduction to the paintings: only go where invited

The first protocol to observe, when visiting Gwion sites, is, 'only go where invited'. Gwion Gwion translates as 'artist-inventor', and the intellectual property of their imagery belongs to the ancestral artists and their descendants, not foreign visitors with no responsibility in Wunan law. Before getting close to the images all visitors must announce their intentions to ancestors at some distance first so as not to disturb the precinct with sudden noise, and to provide a clear explanation for the visit to the paintings to display discretion. The ancestral paintings have a special status as *mamaa* (secret and sacred is a barely adequate English translation) forming a deeply intellectual realm that demands a strictly quiet ambience and restrained behaviour in their presence. Once within the intriguing realm of even faint imagery, *munnumburra* look into every Gwion image and see ancestors and also look outwards into scenes of history in the surrounding landscape. Even the most experienced opinion of the rigorous 'researcher' can never compare to the object.



**Figure 6.** Food sharing icon at Anaut.ngarri dambun. Located within Jillinya's mamac (secret and sacred) sanctuary in Anaut.ngarri dambun, this venerated grid image represents the exchange and trade of food such as yams and waterlily. As with all the female imagery accumulated at this site, it is reported to have been painted by women.

perspective of the Aboriginal law expert recognised as *mun-numburra*.

Ngarinyin acknowledge the pre-eminence of Jillinya, the Great Mother revered as the proto-female, the mother of all humans who gave women their fecundity and power of reproduction. According to the fundamental chronology of humanity in the region, during the early nomadic era before there were Wunan laws over land, people focused their reverence on Jillinya, the Big Mother of all humans who gave them the first social law of sharing food. This respect is made visual as a network grid in one icon central to her sanctuary shelter (Fig. 6).

This was the widespread cultural environment when the Gwion Gwion bird invented the tradition, when men observed a small bird flying around a rock-shelter wiping blood from its beak to leave a fine red line on a sandstone surface. Today the Gwion Gwion bird is known by *munnumburra* as an extremely alert and crafty creature that still inhabits rockshelters containing ancient paintings and that has the power to influence the minds of people today. When viewing the paintings in its presence, visitors may become confused and have strange or fearful encounters

or experience deceptive ideas for which they cannot account.

#### **A Gwion painting recorded on film**

During research with the Ngarinyin *munnumburra* in 1999, I filmed a spontaneous painting event. This forms the central scene of the film entitled *GWION*<sup>6</sup>. In this film, four Ngarinyin *munnumburra* inform us in abbreviated scenes presenting a basic and discrete introduction to public audiences of the fundamentals of the Gwion art tradition edited in three parts: (1) motivation and preparation; (2) the event of creating an image on the surface, and (3) the viewing and contemplation of the image and the artists.

##### *Part 1. Motivation and preparation*

*Munnumburra* visit paintings and sing the most ancient known Wunan songs about birds — in reference to the nomadic Gwion who invented the painting tradition. *Munnumburra* prepare and demonstrate a variety of materials and techniques

<sup>6</sup> Shown at Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) in Melbourne in 2001 <[www.acmi.net.au/pathways.asp](http://www.acmi.net.au/pathways.asp)> (Doring 2001).



Figure 7. Left: norgun concave stone palette at Wulu.ngarri. Right: mamandu bark cut to obtain sap.

invented by the Gwion. Three public titles for artists are heard in conversation among the *munnumburra* and commonly used to extend the meanings of their roles in social history:

- Gwion Gwion – artists as inventors of hunting technology and Gwion painting techniques.
- Munga.nunga – artists as visionaries of Wunan legal concepts and social structures.
- Jenagi Jenagi – artists as cultural messengers importing and exporting sacred objects along Wunan exchange routes or pathways – *dukwan*.

It has been publicly known that the distinctive red colour of most Gwion images derives from an indelible paint prepared from the sap of the rough-barked *mamandu* tree (Ngarjno et al. 2000: 122–124). This is *Terminalia ferdinandiana* Exell (family Combretaceae) – a spreading tree native to Australia and common in Kimberley region, its whitish-green ripe fruits are used as food and for medicinal effects, both for its high vitamin-C content and as antibacterial and antifungal (e.g. Anon. n.d.).

In the scorched sandstone escarpment country where crests and gorges are strewn with sun-baked rocks, and around massive loose boulders where *bunja* (rockshelters and overhangs) often contain paintings, *mamandu* trees invariably grow nearby.

When Banggal selected a flat stone from loose cave-fill he deftly knapped one thin edge until it was sharp and suitable for use as a chopper. Then using it as a *menda* (hand axe) he cut and exposed the bloody inner bark of a nearby *mamandu*. In a concave *norgun* (stone palette; Fig. 7) he broke the bark into pieces and easily ground it to a bright paste that exuded red fluid until a glistening liquid residue was ready for use. Red ochres and oxides can be ground on any flat surface with water, but fixatives such as orchid sap or wattle gum must be added to the blend. *Mamandu* needs only time for the colour to seep out and settle, which makes a concave *norgun* invaluable for the Gwion artist. The deep red *mamandu* sap provides

both fixative and dye; its rich colour still stains many ancient *norgun* ...

During filming Banggal comments on the ingenuity of the inventive Gwion:

... that's *mamandu* they use those for paintings – It is sticking like a glue – You stick on that stone there ... because it's got glue already. *Mamandu* ... this tree *mamandu*! These wise people ... Jenagi people who started this, find out what is better for painting ... it's got glue already.

The published account continues:

Early painters are said to have copied the Gwion bird by applying blood. Their use of a feather brush could be instrumental in producing the fine, flowing outlines and minute details that give such life to the smaller Gwion silhouettes.

After the feather is moistened between the lips, it is dipped into sticky *mamandu* paint. Then a feather brush can be held over the palette with one hand, so that the thumb and forefinger of the other hand can be slipped over the stem of the quill and dragged down to the feather tip to drain off any extra paint until none shows on the outside of the feather. In this way, the artist knows that the barbules that keep the feather in tension are holding an even amount of paint along the brush. As a result, a fine steady line can be drawn with consistent thickness on the stone surface. The elastic sap of the *mamandu* has just the right consistency for fine, even brushwork. Its deep and luminous red hue closely matches the faded red colour of many Gwion paintings ...

The initial line is used for the primary outline before any infill is made. Some images have such even outlines, only a paint of smooth consistency as *mamandu* and brushes as thin as feathers could achieve such fine results.

Black pigment is readily found wherever fires have left charcoal on the ground. Deposits of *jimbri* and *gagul* (red) and *gumbaru* (yellow) pigments are often exposed in the floor or banks of creek-beds. *Onmal*, a white pigment, can have various sources, but one favoured deposit is known as the fossilised excrement of Gubu.ngarri, the ancestral king brown snake.

All Gwion paintings were not the monochromatic residue we observe now.

Red oxides and haematite deteriorate or change their original colour over time, and some motifs have sections missing where a white or yellow pigment, or perhaps blood, has eroded away without staining the rock. Where other paint has perished, 'negatives' – shapes of absent tools or apparel – can be discerned against the discoloured rock. The space of a particular shape, an *urilimul* armband or girdle, easily can be distinguished from eroded gaps in the painted human form. ...

Early Gwion figures — those underlying a series of superimpositions — appear more basic in shape, with stiff limbs described with an even, thick line. ... Painting the basic human body requires the artist to have clarity of vision before putting paint on rock. ...

Exceptional skill in realising anatomical detail can be seen in the accurate definition of elbow bone structure displayed in one painting of a long arm holding a curved *mandi* ('boomerang').<sup>7</sup>

The basic profiles of the *jegabi* (image of the human body) require a minimum of twenty lines. Closer examination of later figures reveals that those with very fine profiles were firmly outlined first, then evenly blocked or filled in to complete the silhouette. Gwion *jegabi* show well-observed body shapes with thigh, knee and calves curving down and straightening with long shins to thin ankles. Larger figures can display a greater detail of ritual apparel and adornment. Obvious male and female genitals or breasts are absent from most Gwion art.

Certain negative images show where body paint would have been worn on appropriate parts of the body during formal public rituals. One probable example of missing *onmal* (white pigment) is the figure holding a yam beside a coiled *nguniri* hair noose that is painted near a large *andarri* (possum). The spaces in his body clearly match similar white body-marking worn by Banggal when singing the powerful *gulbrungi* that announces and compels everyone to attend a ceremony.

Other important performers of similar Wunan signal songs were likely to have been recorded in paint now heavily eroded.<sup>8</sup>

Some key distinctions between male and female apparel are exemplified during the *birrina*, a joining-of-genders ceremony, when a male performer wearing



**Figure 8.** Guringe site in Anaut.ngarri dambun. This animated group scene depicts recurring ceremonial joining of men and women within Jillinya's *mamaa* sanctuary. The leading female is depicted dancing with arms raised in the praying mantis (*mandzu*) posture symbolic of Jillinya; this graceful female embodies the *mandzu* presence. Layered on top of earlier generations of similar imagery, the later painting is superbly accomplished and has long been kept secret by the Ngarinyin for its iconic stature.

the tri-pointed *walbud* belt girdle of marsupial hide approaches the leading female dancer who is shown wearing the triangular *mambi* girdle (Fig. 8).

Some Kimberley plateau paintings show solitary Gwion wearing unique *mudurra* (headdress), and standing apart from any congregated images. *Munnumburra* may interpret them as Gwion portrayed while in a private state of being connected to *junjun* ('ancestral evidence') forming a *dulwan mamaa* ('secret and sacred pathway') in the direction they face.

*Part 2 a painting event: it's not going to come off!*

Strengthened by the tradition of Gwion Gwion rock art, Nyawarra was compelled to paint a sentinel human figure that demonstrates the Wunan identity demand extensions to the basic human profile. This documentation is the only recording of a traditional Gwion figure being created at a site according to Wunan law. The painting event happened as Nyawarra and I were walking north along Garimbu creek looking for a place to camp. While filming above a waterfall, I noticed Nyawarra on the other side reaching down to fill his tin cup, so I asked 'Making a cup of tea?' and he nonchalantly replied 'No, making a painting'.

The result (Fig. 9) demonstrates how Gwion painters invented human shapes with multiple Wunan connections as extensions of the body in profile, the specific characteristic of the tradition.

Nyawarra painted the sentinel Gwion with black charcoal, not the usual red *mamandu* sap used for fine

<sup>7</sup> The awry assumption of a 'paunch figure' style made in a presentation to the recent AURA conference in Adelaide simply ignores the pregnant form common through the strong female role in Gwion rock art from the earliest period, and again ignores significant details such as the oversize amulets worn at the elbow by women in ceremonial events associated with The Big Mother. Perhaps one focus for future research could be the horizon in the ages of the human figure before and after the installation of Wunan laws, when portrayal of three digit figures ceased and become described as full and valid landowners and eventually Jenagi Jenagi.

<sup>8</sup> Nyawarra has reported that this *nguniri* icon has recently been damaged or vandalised beyond repair following visits of rock art enthusiasts along the Mitchell River road. Nyawarra has also reported the theft of one *mamaa* ('secret and sacred') egg-shaped fertility stone from the Neggamorro and Yemben wanjina site within Doongan station that was documented in situ by the Pathway Project in 1994.

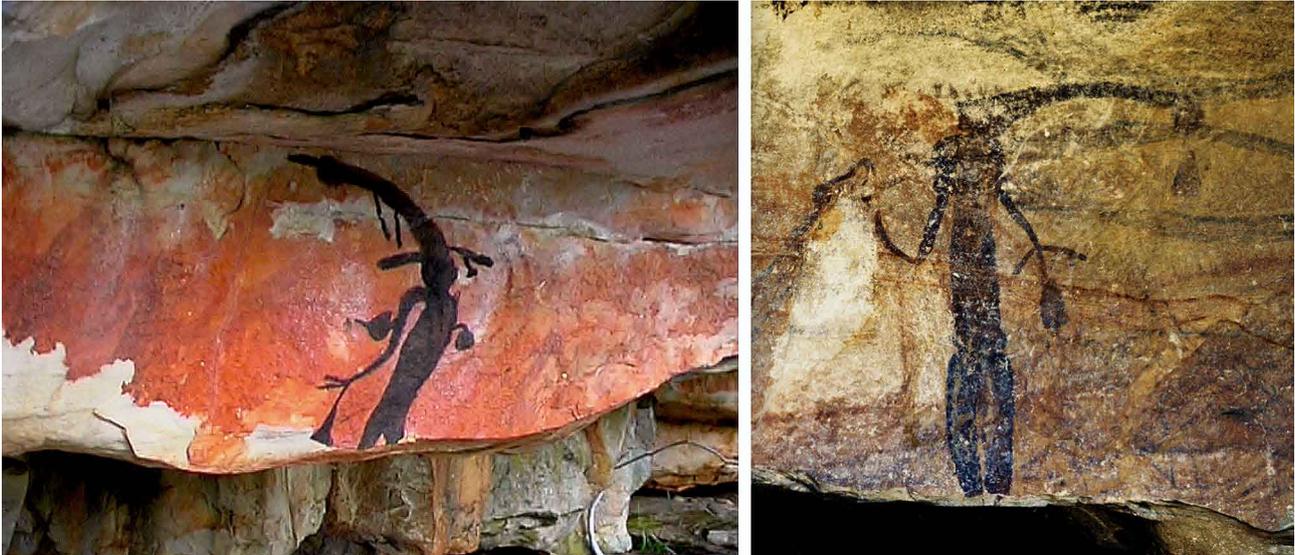


Figure 9. Nyawarra painting a sentinel human figure at a Garimbu creek shelter (left). Sentinel Gwion in Anaut.ngarri dambun (right).

brushwork. This Gwion stands as a stark black signal against the red-stained rock and will be easily read from some distance across the river. He mixed wattle sap into some ground charcoal adding spit while stirring the paste until he gained the right liquidity to work with a stiff brush of chewed sedge. Nyawarra first profiled the *mudurra* – the synonymous Gwion headdress rich with meaning to the initiated clearly extending from his head – then limbs and torso, eventually completing several extensions from wrist to arms and shoulders, marking the whole identity as one black silhouette. This Gwion sentinel signals to the observer who they are, and where they belong according to Wunan law.

Afterwards, across the creek, Nyawarra explained in considerable detail on camera how the sentinel stood at the convergence of several Wunan pathways, and how the Gwion was fresh again and clearly visible connecting three different places of Wunan *dambun*-inherited country. Nyawarra also mentioned a remarkably distant connection with a sentinel Gwion far away on the north coast, on the exterior rock wall protecting the sanctuary of Jilinya the Big Mother in Anaut.ngarri *dambun* (Fig. 9). Nyawarra's painting is contemporary evidence of the *primary* motivation for Gwion paintings coming from being connected to country by Wunan law which demands the proper social orientation of the local ancestral image.

### Part 3. Viewing in conversation: *Gwion rock art is not silent*

Probably the most overlooked and least understood ingredient of Gwion art is the depth of conversation spoken in private among the *munnumburra*, as demonstrated by the intense dialogue of four Ngarinyin experts discussing their influence while expressing their fear of wrathful Jenagi Jenagi ancestors. One of

their animated and passionate conversations about Gwion paintings forms the final part of the film.

The four *munnumburra* experts, Ngarjno, Ungudman, Banggal and Nyawarra, spent eight years together recording narratives in front of Gwion paintings. They revealed that the graphic evidence in Gwion imagery confirms the verbal testimony of the *munnumburra* about history in Wunan law. On every occasion, their dialogue and discussion animates rock art in layers of significance in Wunan law that begins our education of a very complex array of subjects and themes.

### Conclusion

Our research acknowledges that Gwion rock art *is not silent* and has never been considered merely mute imagery. It reminds us how art sustains ideas and stimulates conversation and remains important for what ideas we take away with us. Gwion rock art may appear silent to foreigners, but truly comes alive in the local language with song and every specific detail of flora and fauna as Wunan references. Because these intriguing images invite conversation, for millennia descendants have sat and faced their ancestors and talked in union with their images, so inevitably, many long historical narratives accumulated.

The complex realm of Gwion rock art is the antithesis of European art collected in public museums. It must be acknowledged, conserved and managed as a different art experience combining intimate conversation and discrete viewing as an intense form of education.

Sacred words were spoken during preparation and execution of the paintings and in discussion afterwards. Some paintings have *mamaa* ('secret and sacred') titles that may be spoken only in their presence and may not be used out-of-sight of the ancestor image. Most imagery is only approached after orations started at some distance before arrival at the site. While viewing

venerated images residing on site, discussions among the *munnumburra* continued to refine knowledge of the artists' visual language and stimulate the performance of ancient Wunan songs, so often a powerful part of proceedings when visiting Gwion paintings with appropriate elders on their *dulwan maaaa* (secret and sacred pathways).

Finally, some understanding of meanings of the three interchangeable titles for the artists of the tradition must help us to understand better why the Aboriginal survivors of the colonial invasion of the Kimberley region maintained an embargo on the true relevance of Gwion rock art: in order to deflect enquiry from officials, anthropologists and in particular archaeologists who claim that no cultural connection continues or exists for Aboriginal peoples (cf. McNiven and Russell 1997; McNiven 2011). Long before those foreigners arrived, direct exposure of the human figures of their ancestors was illegal, and the sacredness of their role in originating Wunan law had to be protected as all four *munnumburra* emphasise in unison (Ngarjno et al. 2000: 83, 78):

He very dangerous in the law  
secret things ... *mamaa* he on that path

Hey! They couldn't talk about it in Aborigine ways  
in Aborigine Law  
it is evil bloke who speak 'Jenagi'  
in that time ... in those early days they get killed right  
there

he very dangerous that Jenagi  
**Gwion was a secret to protect man ... blood ... law**  
...  
(Nyawarra and Ngarjno, Ungudman, Banggal in unison)

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