

CEREMONY IN KIMBERLEY ROCK ART

On 1 September 2004, Dr David M Welch, who was visiting Perth, treated the Kimberley Society to a lively discussion about rock art. At the time, he was on a trip from Darwin, where he practises as a GP. David has studied Australian rock art for 25 years, and has published widely on the subject. He has also worked with Grahame L Walsh.

David first introduced us to the mythical figures acknowledged by present day Aboriginal people: the Wandjina figures of the Kimberley, ancestral beings involved in law-making, and other large deities such as the Lightning Men—the rainmakers. Much earlier were the so-called Bradshaw figures, described by David as “Tasselled Figures” and “Bent Knee Figures”, which the Aborigines recognise as part of the rock rather than being made by humans. These are beautifully elegant figures that strongly suggest human movement. One such figure has been dated as being at least 17,000 years old, by thermoluminescence from a mud wasp nest over it. Then David went on to talk about various rock art features which occur as a result of ceremony or ritual. Amongst these were hand stencils, which imply “belonging”, cupules or hollows in rock walls, abraded grooves used in rainmaking rituals, deliberate defacing of earlier art, sacred thin slabs of rock sandwiched in crevices in caves, sacred rounded stones thought to be “eggs” or “kidney fat” of Ancestral beings, and, finally, stone pathways and piles of rock associated with initiation ceremonies.

David went on to illustrate with slides many of features that occur repeatedly in photographs of ceremonies and in the depiction of humans in all periods of the rock art. These features include body decoration, hand held items, and ceremonial or dancing positions. In the art, they appear in the “Tasselled Figures”, “Bent Knee Figures”, and long thin “Straight Part Figures”.

Common body decorations include elaborate headdresses. The long conical headdresses are common to all periods, and David showed one in a 1932 photograph. They were made into a cone shape with bark wrapped around with human hair and coloured with ochre. There were also cylindrical or bucket-shaped headdresses, often with extensions such as branches, and arc shaped and circular headdresses such as those shown on the Wandjinas and earlier figures. Still others were circular ones shown above the head. Decorations include upper armbands holding tassels, strings, feathers or plant protrusions such as leaves. Hanging from the neck may be string necklaces, ceremonial bags common in Arnhemland, and occasionally animal claws. Waist belts with feather tassels, bunches of emu feathers, or skirts of such things as bandicoot tails or branches are often featured. Body paint and feather body decoration are often seen on “Straight Part Figures” but rarely seen on “Bent Knee Figures” or “Tasselled Figures”. Large forearm bracelets are specific to “Bent Knee Figures”, which don't exhibit tassels. Ankle decorations are rare. Feathers are stuck on with blood or, more often now, with

flour and water. Some worn items make use of native bees' wax as a fixative. Hand held ceremonial items include lengths of string, ceremonial bags, "wands" i.e. ceremonial or dancing sticks, bunches of leaves or small branches, emu feather fans and effigies—models representing totems or specific combinations of weaponry. Specific weaponry combinations are one or more boomerangs in each hand, a boomerang and a spearthrower, a boomerang and a club or stick and one spearthrower but no spears. Items are sometimes held in unusual ways, e.g. a spearthrower held at the wrong end. In fighting scenes a club is used with a shield, and in hunting scenes a spear is fitted into a spearthrower. Spearthrowers possibly came into use about 11,000 years ago; they don't appear in earlier art.

Ceremonial scenes may include a song man with clap sticks, clap boomerangs or a didgeridoo; the latter being rare in Kimberley art. Weapons may be shown lain on the ground. Figures with bent knees may be shown in side or frontal view, arms may be held in front of the body with elbows bent and pointing down, or both arms may be raised above the head possibly holding weapons. Alternately, one arm may be raised and the other on the hip (as in dancing a jig), or they may be shown with arms outstretched sideways. Sometimes two people are depicted facing each other with arms raised, and sometimes several figures are shown with synchronised, choreographed alignment. Ceremonial dancing poses are recognisable. On the whole, by comparing the rock art images with archival photographs of Aboriginal people and their ceremonies, David provided an interesting new perspective on this fascinating topic.

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Further reading (published articles written by David Welch):

'The early rock art of the Kimberley, Australia: developing a chronology' in *Time and Space: dating and spatial considerations in rock art research: papers of Symposia F and E, Second AURA Congress, Cairns 1992*, edited by Jack Steinbring, et al., Archaeological Publications, Melbourne, 1993, pp. 13–21.

'Early naturalistic human figures in the Kimberley, Australia', *Rock Art Research*, Vol. 10, No. 1, May 1993, pp. 24–38.

'Beeswax rock art in the Kimberley, Western Australia', *Rock Art Research*, Vol. 12, No. 1, May 1995, pp. 23–9.

'Material culture in Kimberley rock art, Australia', *Rock Art Research*, Vol. 13, No. 2, Nov. 1996, pp. 104–23.

'Fight or dance? Ceremony and the spearthrower in Northern Australian rock art', *Rock Art Research*, Vol.14, No. 2, Nov. 1997, pp. 88–112.