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THE SOCIAL MEANING OF NORTH AUSTRALIAN ROCK PAINTINGS

The study of rock paintings in Arnhem Land is one of the last chances, or perhaps the very last chance to clarify the motivation and social meaning of the artistic expression of this society of hunters and gatherers. Generally speaking, this art ceased to exist at the beginning of the twentieth century, but we still sporadically find a few Aborigines, who know the meaning of some comparatively not very old paintings, or in quite exceptional cases we can find individuals still painting rock paintings in the traditional style. The Czechoslovak expedition met in 1969 such an Aborigine, Mandarg, a Rembaranga — Djangborn on the Upper Cadell River.

Some authors (Mountford, 1956; Brandl, 1973) distinguish two types of Arnhem Land Aboriginal Paintings: the older, so-called Mimi and the younger X-ray style.

Since the notion Mimi, due to the locally limited knowledge of aboriginal informants, is not quite clear, I shall call it in this paper "archaic style", since it is spread over northern Australia, i.e. over a territory larger than Arnhem Land, and since these are, so far, the oldest Australian paintings. They are archaeologically bound to the so-called Pirri culture.

The meaning of the oldest paintings, which are in most cases red, monochrome, is unknown to present-day Aborigines, no doubt due to their antiquity. Some light can be thrown on their meaning by their location. The location of these paintings, picturing people and animals, usually differs from the location of paintings done in X-ray style.

Archaic paintings are often painted on dangerous, neckbreaking and inaccessible places (Deaf Adder Creek, Nangalore) where the X-ray paintings are never found. These places are not dwelling places or burial sites and there are no sorcery figures in this most ancient art. Since these paintings do not deal with erotic or sexual topics, remain

only ritual, mythological or aesthetic functions as their explanation. Most ritual paintings, however, require the presence of a comparatively large group of people — attending the ritual, and thus also this possibility seems improbable. Art for its own sake is very difficult to prove, but aesthetic function played certainly its role. The most probable meaning of most of the early archaic paintings is mythological and (or) historical (paintings of some important events).

DIFFERENT WAYS OF PAINTING HUMAN AND ANIMAL FIGURES

Small dynamic human figures are typical of this early archaic style. These figures, full of movement, contrast strongly with the static pictures of animals of the same style, differing from human figures often also in size — they are much bigger.

Perhaps it will be of interest to draw your attention to the fact that in the European cave paintings of paleolithic magdalenian time we can see also a striking difference between the realistic picturing of animals, on the one hand, and between the unnatural, caricature-like human figures and faces on the other. After all, in the late north Australian X-ray paintings we can see also a considerable difference between the paintings of people and of animals. While the intestines of the animals are carefully pictured, the painter painting human figures usually limits himself to painting the backbone, and the outline of the body is filled only with geometrical hatching. Psychologically it is quite understandable: for a primitive hunter the painting of animals and people represented two, thematically quite different worlds. The anatomically well known prey and not so well anatomically known man.

Other characteristic feature of the archaic

North-Australian painting is that — in contrast to X-ray painting — they are practically never in superposition, i.e. they are not overpainted by new layers of paintings.

If we are looking for the explanations of the superposition in X-ray paintings we see that it is the result of the loss of meaning of the earlier painting, due to the arrival of a new painter, not interested in the former tradition and in older paintings with their functions. In some of these paintings it is believed that they have some active force and that this is limited to the moment of painting activity itself. Subsequent superposition of a new painting is the result of limited "life-span" of these paintings. Paintings no more "living" are considered mostly of no value. I have not found a single case showing that superposition of figures makes some sense and that the superposed figures make a theme. Always it is new theme, even new style showing new painter. Only an ownership of painted rock and psychological continuity brings him to paint in places of old paintings and sometimes of course it is the importance of the locality itself (e.g. in important mythological places). Analogous reasons led most probably to superposition also in the European palaeolithic paintings. If Laming-Emperaire (1962) tries to explain the superposition like a way of thematic continuity than in Australia this is certainly not the case.

Other characteristic feature, common not only to north-Australian rock art but to the rock art of many primitive hunting societies, is the absence of arranging the individual pictures according to co-ordinates, namely according to the main horizontal. Single pictures are usually *oriented in various directions*. The speculations of certain archeologists, as regards the meaning of this varying orientation, are the results of the European traditional artistic view, incorrectly applied to the art of the primitive hunting societies.

X-ray paintings are mostly situated in comparatively well accessible places. They often form groups of paintings, sometimes smaller, sometimes larger, often there are whole "galleries". Their meaning may differ a great deal.

1. In overhanging rocks, serving as shelters during the wet season, suitable rock walls are often painted. This is evidently a parallel to the habit to paint the inside of bark huts (see J. Jelínek, 1977). Picture of animals and spirits prevail in these shelters. This is secular art, having usually mythological and (or) erotic meaning. Sometimes pictures are painted for pleasure only. Examples of painted rock-shelters are at Cadell River Crossing (on the left bank), where the above-mentioned man Mandarg showed us in 1969 a painted cave, which had been used by his family as a shelter during the previous wet season (1968—69). We found painted rock-shelter (living site) also on the Yaimani Creek in Arnhem Land Plateau and on the Goomadeer River (not far from the Gunnwingu burying-ground), and also near Birraduk Creek (northern fringes of the Spencer Range). If we compare this situation with the situation known from palaeolithic Europe,

we must say that the generally accepted view, that European cave paintings are concentrated to the deep inside of the caves, is not correct. Fragments of painted ceiling at the entrance of a cave used as living site (e.g. in Abri Blanchard, Abri Labatut etc.) or rare finds of remnants of pigments (e.g. on the sculptured blocks in Le Roc), situated also in the "entrance hall" of the cave, show that parts of the caves used as paleolithic living sites were sometimes also painted.

2. The North-Australian X-ray paintings are often connected with the burial places of the Aborigines. Usually there are only few burials (2—4) — due to the fact that both the shelter and the burial-ground belong to a not too numerous clan. The paintings have usually limited topics, i.e. animal figures different spirit figures, spear-throwing hunters etc. similar as the paintings of dwelling places. As an example let us mention the Injaluk Hill near Oenpelli with a cave on top of the hill, three galleries in Inagurdurwil and two near Red Lily Lagoon, Upper Cadell River etc., I would like to add that the use of a certain place as a burial place does not exclude its further use for other purposes. At the Cadell River Crossing e.g. below a large mushroom-like rock with a painting of the big Rainbow-Serpent, called by its painter Mandarg "Burlung", there were human remains buried in the hollow tree trunk. This burying place still had a mythological function, we were told by Mandarg, and he had painted the Burlung because Burlung lives inside the rock. Finally it was Mandarg's dreaming site. To our question, whether human remains in a dreaming site or even in a living place do not matter, whether it is possible to live in a cave where human remains are deposited, Mandarg answered positively, explaining us that these dead men were nothing, since their burial corroborree had taken place long ago. In the view of the Aborigines after the corroborree the spirit of the deceased returns to its Dreaming site and the remains of the skeleton are only dead material.

3. Some paintings, exceptionally even entire galleries, have ritual meaning — take e.g. the Dadbu locality (the Rembarranga tribe) some 20 miles south-east of the Mainoru cattle station, on the southern fringe of Arnhem Land. This place serves for the snake increase ceremony, and the Kunapipi ritual of the Rembarranga in 1968 took place in this vicinity. The meaning of the paintings, concentrated here into three galleries, is published elsewhere (Jelínek, 1977). There is a similar example at the Obiri III rock. Here in the rock gallery, on the level of the alluvial plain, among the figures of lizards and fishes, we can see a simple figure of a yellow snake with red outlines (Ch. Mountford, 1956) (pl. 62 B). It served also for the ritual to ensure the increase of water snakes. In other gallery on Cannon Hill, at the foot of the rock just in the level of the flood plain, there are two Murayian paintings, serving for ritual purposes.

It follows that in a group of paintings or in a gallery, mostly only some of the paintings have the ritual meaning.

4. Pictures of mythological topics belong among the most frequent rock paintings of Arnhem Land — take e.g. the paintings of the Rainbow-Serpent on the Cadell River or Deaf Adder Creek, paintings of the Namaroto spirits on the Cadell River or in the Noorlangie Rock gallery, paintings of the Namaragan the Lightning Man on the Cadell River left bank, in the gallery on the Birraduk Creek, in the cave on top of the Injaluk Hill near Oenpelli, in the Noorlangie Rock and Bala Uru gallery on the Deaf Adder Creek. We can mention also a large number of paintings belonging to the archaic paintings of the dynamic human figures, interpreted by present-day Aborigines as Mimi, without knowing much more about their original meaning. We can not rule out, however, with regard to the low mutability rate of the Australian Aboriginal culture, that the interpretation of these archaic paintings of human figures as the paintings of the small Mimi rock spirits follow the original ancient tradition, and is taken-over by the present-day Aborigines without much mythological details.

A special group of mythological paintings is represented by paintings having for present-day Aborigines sometimes the role of their so-called Dreaming sites, e.g. in the Yaimani Creek locality, which served as Dreaming site for Mandarg's son Bunganyial, or the mushroom-shaped rock at Upper Cadell River Crossing with the painting of the Burlung Rainbow-Serpent, which was one of Mandarg's Dreaming sites.

Many mythological figures have half-animal and half-human forms. At the Cadell River Crossing e.g. the figure of the Majlva spirit has human body and kangaroo head. Paintings on the Deaf Adder Creek show that these mythological beings with human bodies and kangaroo heads belong to a very ancient tradition, since many of these paintings have been derived, undoubtedly, from the archaic dynamic style.

We can find, naturally, numerous examples of half-human, half-animal figures of mythological meaning. E.g., the white painting of woman-lizard in the rock-shelter on the Goomadeer River, the woman-lizard from Obiri III, or the man-bird Djuwak from Bala Uru on the Deaf Adder Creek, and many others.

When we turn our attention to the European palaeolithic cave paintings, we shall find also here many half-human, half-animal beings, often explained as masked sorcerers. The best-known of them is the figure of the "sorcerer with animal mask" from the Trois Frères Cave (H. Breuil 1952). I compared meticulously these paintings with the paintings of many ethnical hunting groups, and I have arrived to the conclusion, that these figures represent mostly mythological beings, not masked sorcerers.

This conjecture is supported also by certain figures of unnatural animals (half-bear, half-wolf in the Trois Frères Cave, or a bear with reindeer legs etc.), which can not be masked human figures. This way of paintings is, of course, not limited only

to palaeolithic Europe or to Australia. There are good examples of it in South Africa, e.g. human bodies with animal heads, or pictures of unnatural animals, such as an elephant with the head of a vulture from Ndedema Gorge (Pager, 1971) which cannot be a mask. Many archaeologists and ethnologists have been deceived by certain very rare, but extremely impressive and often frequently published reproductions of paintings representing masked hunters, such as the well-known painting of Bushman ostrich hunters (Alimen 1955). The number of these paintings of masked hunters (not sorcerers) is very low, compared with mythological paintings, and cannot alone sufficiently explain the paintings of the so-called unnatural beings in Europe. In Australia masks are unknown.

5. Certain single paintings, or sometimes entire groups of paintings had magical meaning. Most often they represent deformed anthropomorphic figures, with deformed parts of the body, including the sex organs. The limbs are often severed. E.g. the painting on the ceiling of the cave at Old Woman's Dreaming at Cahills Crossing on the East Alligator River or other dismembered figure in the gallery near the Red Lily Lagoon on the road from the East Alligator River to Oenpelli, or a whole group of paintings in the main Mt Brockman cave. These North-Australian paintings have their analogy in other prehistoric paintings having magic meaning. Such an explanation is usually accepted even for some west-European palaeolithic paintings, e.g. the paintings of a mammoth (or elephant) with a red patch in the region of the heart. It is from Pindal, North Spain. Worth-mentioning are also the paintings of animals with an arrow or spear in their bodies. From the European palaeolithic cave art we know such engravings from La Colombière (a rhino and a reoideer) or bison in Niaux, etc. From among Australian paintings we can mention the picture of a kangaroo with a spear, and a turtle with a spear in Bala Uru on the Deaf Adder Creek and a speared kangaroo in El Sherano IV. To this group belong also in European palaeolithic art the painting, or rather engraving, on the muddy wall of the Montespan cave, of a horse, damaged by numerous blows. I found two similar examples of mutilation of Australian paintings. In the Inagurdurwil gallery between Oenpelli and the East Alligator River the painting of big slim human figure was heavily damaged by stones thrown at it (the painting has been published by Ch. Mountford in 1954), and in the Nangalore gallery there is a large mutilated figure of a Mamandi, malignant female spirit (Jelinek, 1977).

6. Some galleries are connected with workshops for the manufacture of semi-processed stone tools. In the area of the Upper Cadell River Crossing a workshop of this kind has been discovered in the so-called Great Gallery. The Gallery is situated high above the valley on the right side of the river, at the foot of a cliff, and the paintings are situated on the vertical rock wall — they belong to the archaic style. In front of the rock wall there was not enough place for dwelling, and no burials

have been found nearby. Plenty of stone cores have been found there, mostly in the shape of turtle carapace. There were also several percuteurs and great quantities of not suitable fragments. There were no small chippings arising during the final trimming of the tool (retouch), and thus the conclusion is that it was only a semiproduct manufacturing workshop. This is proved also by the fact that around the rock-shelters serving as living sites large quantities of small chips (trimming products) and only very few cores have been found. A similar workshop was found on the opposite bank of the Cadell River (on the left bank), high in the rocks, beneath a huge stone mushroom, again aside a gallery of archaic and single X-ray paintings. There were no late X-ray style paintings (detailed description of the workshop see J. Jelínek, 1977). The two localities are comparatively far from fresh water, and thus they cannot be used as permanent camps. The access to the workshops is also difficult. The paintings, accompanying the workshop are of various types. In the Great Gallery besides other archaic human figures we can also find a painting of a corroboree, archaic-style animal figures (kangaroos, fishes, birds, a spiny ant-eater, a turtle, as well as spirits with kangaroo heads). No X-ray style.

Paintings in the second locality contained spirit figures of Muli Muligan, and animals (turtle) in simple X-ray style, and archaic paintings of a snake and kangaroos etc. The third excellent example is the cave at Kolondjorluk Creek in Deaf Adder Creek area, where stone tool workshop and mythological paintings were found.

The list of the paintings shows that the workshops contained paintings of various meanings. Some of them are mythological and also totemic (animal) figures can be ritual. Exceptionally we find secular or erotic paintings.

7. Erotic or sexual paintings can be found more or less isolated, e.g. at Cadell River Crossing, Deaf Adder Creek, Goomadeer River, Inagurdurwill, or in whole groups e.g. El Sherano, where the figures are usually pictured with strongly enlarged sex organs, together with a large number of squatting female figures, inviting for a coitus. In El Sherano III and in Bala Uru (Deaf Adder Creek) we can find erotical scenes of the sexual play before intercourse. The existence of localities with strong sexual motivation can be explained in two ways: either it is a ritual or mythological affair, or they are paintings of one artist emphasizing erotic motivation on his own initiative. Primitive hunting populations know no such a sexual restrictions as in European culture where this is the legacy of medieval religiosity.

Erotically motivated paintings can be interpreted either as magic, when painter is picturing his most cherished wishes or as a picture of an event or as a matter of simple erotic ventilation. I should like to add an interesting story — when I asked Bunganyial, son of Mandarg at Cadell River Crossing about the meaning of one of his erotic paintings we were just watching, he smiled and

said: "But you know it, don't you"? I thought that it could have been pure erotics, and I asked him when did he paint it. The answer was: "A long time ago, when I was as old as my brother is now". (His brother was fifteen at the time.) Obviously it was a simple erotic ventilation of a maturing adolescent — similarly as in our culture when boys paint sometimes erotic pictures in hidden places.

8. Now let us have a look whether some of these pictures could have been *motivated aesthetically* (art for its own sake). We can not prove it in the case of rock paintings. In the decoration of human bodies and various tools (e.g. boomerangs, knives, etc.), however, such purely decorative tendencies appear. Explicative is the case of Mandarg's rainbow-snake painting at Cadell River. A white painting overpainted by the rainbow-snake paintings was painted by his small son, who was that time with him and meanwhile the father was painting a mythological painting the small boy made another his own painting of a man. This was then partly overpainted by Mandarg's rainbow-snake. The boy evidently tried to copy the activity of his father and to paint his own painting.

The Aboriginal painter usually does not hide his aesthetic satisfaction over a well done painting, and members of the whole group appreciate his skill. It is true that many individuals try to paint, but those who really excell (both technically and aesthetically) are highly esteemed. All these circumstances force us to judge the aesthetic values and criteria of the Aborigines carefully. We must do our utmost to detach ourselves, as much as possible, from the European aesthetic traditions. Only so we are able to find an objective approach, bringing us nearer to Aboriginal traditions.

Some of the archaic-style dynamic human figure paintings are also worth studying. They are practically never overpainted, and the movement is expressed through a very wide scale of expressions. This seems to prove an aesthetic approach of the Aboriginal artist. An aesthetic motive seems to be present also in some secular paintings, on the walls of rock-shelters. The ideas I have expressed here are presented on a broader comparative basis elsewhere (Jelínek, 1977).

9. We sometimes find large groups of archaic style human figures in the rock paintings, obviously presenting some *historic events*. These paintings represent e.g. a small group of musicians during a corroboree (a recent painting on the right bank of the East Alligator River at Cahill's Crossing), a corroboree scene on a rock on Cannon Hill (archaic style), or a group of dancers in the Great Gallery at the Upper Cadell River Crossing, another painting in Dadbu near Mainoru, another on a rock behind the Red Lily Lagoon or in Inagurdurwil. There are no analogies to these *scenic* paintings in the European palaeolithic Age — but we can find them in the later archaeological periods, e.g. in the Neolithic Age and later paintings in Spain (Cogul, Alpera, etc.), and also in South-African Bushman paintings.

10. *Stencils* of hand form a special group of paintings. They can be divided into the following subgroups:

1. Red or white negative hand stencils
2. Hand prints
3. Stencils of forearms with additional ornamental painting
4. Hand or forearm paintings

When watching an Aborigine, who finished a rock painting of a crocodile with a white stencil of his hand, I asked him about the meaning of the stencil. "It is my painting, I have painted it", was the reply. It follows from a number of information, obtained from various informants that these stencils can have the following meaning: "This has been done by me!" or "This is my place, my property!", "Do not come here!", etc. These stencils usually specify a person's or somebody's personal property and (or) they are often final acts of the painting. Hand stencils are well-known from the prehistoric times or from the so-called primitive art all over the world. In contrast to it decoratively painted forearms are very rare (see parallel between Arnhem Land and New Guinea, Jelínek, 1977). The decorative meaning of some stencils is quite frequent.

Even the above small survey shows that the motivation and social meaning of north-Australian rock paintings is very different. Parallels, which can be easily found in the European palaeolithic Age, or elsewhere, are caused through analogies in the artistic expressions of these societies of hunters and gatherers. It is very instructive to realize that the European high art in its past periods had similar psychological motivations, and the mythological, religious, magical, historical or erotic motivations and meanings are well-known also from the history of the European art. I mention this because some students thought that the art of the hunting societies of various geographical regions is incomparable, with the art of the developed cultures, as they consider the so-called "primitive art" in its social meaning primitive and therefore different from our own highly developed art. After a study of the north-Australian Aboriginal art we can say that common ecology, similar ways of hunter's life and economy and the imaginative world and ideas of the Aborigines based on these common features are comparable between various hunting societies, provided that environmental differences (climate, landscape, etc.) are considered. In my view the social meaning of so-called "primitive" art can be compared even with the general meaning of art in highly developed cultures.

Some students of European palaeolithic paintings tried to explain the motivation of this art exclusively as "L'art pour l'art" or for its sake (Lartet, 1864) or as magics (Reinach 1903), and recently also as cave sanctuaries of sexually-religious meaning (Leroi Gourhan 1971).

According to comparative studies it seems clear that the motivation of the art of the North Australian Aborigines (and probably the motivation of primitive art elsewhere too) is as complicated and as versatile as that of the European art. Different cultural level and traditions do not mean different mental or psychological qualities. Such a view was the fruit of the past colonialistic period and ideology. The Australian Aborigines or other natural people do not differ, in principle, from the Europeans, in basic mental and psychological qualities and they especially did not differ in the epoch when our European ancestors lived as hunters and gatherers. The causes and social meaning of their artistic creations are in general concept analogous.

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