

ART AND RELIGION  
IN  
NORTH-EAST ARNHEM LAND

by  
EDGAR WELLS

MOORE THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE LIBRARY



3 2042 10099193 8

ART AND RELIGION  
IN  
NORTH-EAST ARNHEM LAND  
by  
EDGAR WELLS

Lecture given at Queens' College

17 March 1992

Albert Nolan, in *Jesus before Christianity*, quotes Schillebeekcx as saying "Historical objectivity is not a reconstruction of the past in its unrepeatable factuality, it is the truth of the past in the light of the present", and goes on to say: "A work of art, for example, can be seen and appreciated without any presuppositions about what it is supposed to be, but it cannot be seen at all except from a vantage point, the same is true of history. We cannot obtain a view of the past except from the place where we are standing at the moment".<sup>1</sup>

From where I stood at the Mission store window not long after arriving at Milingimbi Methodist Mission in late November of 1949 and viewed for the first time the small number of mats and baskets brought in for sale by the women of the representative clans, the exchange of mats for money with which to buy tobacco or maybe a piece of cloth for a dress, the hunters preferring, perhaps, a file for the sharpening of spears, the impression was one of a scarcity of everything. The principle of limitation affected the total atmosphere. Limitation of boat space to bring supplies, consequent limitation of goods for sale; limitation of skills, only a few mats and baskets. Just three shells offered, not much from what I already knew of the range of Aboriginal talent as exposed in a recent Sydney exhibition of Aboriginal art for which Ronald Berndt, Senior Lecturer at the University, had been responsible.<sup>2</sup> Added to this was the alarming information that anyone who could wield a hammer or grasp a spanner and gone to Elcho Island Mission to work the sawmill with Mr Shepherdson. So there were no real craftsmen left at Milingimbi.

However, it had been brought to my notice that my predecessor at Milingimbi, the Revd Arthur Ellemor, had recently sent down to Sydney some bark paintings done out in the bush some long months before for the American/Australian expedition led by Charles P. Mountford.<sup>3</sup> Although professing a distaste for handling Aboriginal bark paintings 'on religious grounds' Ellemor however honoured a promise he gave to Mountford to send down certain barks promised by Bininyuwui to the expedition, but not painted when Mountford left the district.<sup>4</sup> Ellemor, in letting it be known he was not enthusiastic about Aboriginal depiction of Aboriginal ancestral and mythological figures and stores, was reflecting a generally widely held missionary attitude which quickly and persistently became the basis for real differences of opinion among the missionaries and, in particular, between neighbouring, Acting Superintendent Shepherdson, his staff, and Edgar Wells and his wife Ann.

In simple terms the nature of the strongly held, but diverging, opinions arose over the relevance of Aboriginal artistic forms which depicted ancestral legend and mythology, using bark paintings and sculptured artefacts. The Shepherdson view was that the encouragement and continual trading in such items would perpetuate rather than eliminate Aboriginal religious practice and thought, always supposing that the Aboriginal system could be called 'religious'.<sup>5</sup> However, the subject was never allowed to be a matter of serious debate. District Engineer Shepherdson started in Milingimbi in 1926 and no challenge to his Christian fundamentalism was allowed to develop. The Wells only arrived in late 1949!

However, the contribution of Shepherdson and his devoted wife Ella received such high level commendation that in 1954 he was offered special ordination into the ministry of the

<sup>1</sup> Nolan, A. *Jesus before Christianity*, 1977 p.4

<sup>2</sup> Elkin, A.P. & Berndt, R. & C. *Art in Arnhem Land*, Cheshire, 1950

<sup>3</sup> Mountford, C. P. *Art, Myth and Symbolism. Vol 1.* 1956

<sup>4</sup> Ellemor, A. in Udy, J. S. & Clancy, E. G. *Dig or Die*. 1981

<sup>5</sup> Warner, W. L. *A Black Civilization*. Harper Bros, 1937

Uniting Church Historical Society (Victoria)  
c/o Synod Archives  
Uniting Church Centre  
130 Little Collins Street  
Melbourne 3000

© UCA Historical Society (Victoria)

ISBN 0 - 949299 - 92 - 8



Methodist Church, thus enabling his status to be lifted from 'Acting' to Superintendent of Elcho Island Mission. The Revd Edgar A. Wells preached the ordination sermon at a simply marvellous service of worship conducted at Elcho Island.

The cover photograph of Maisie McKenzie's semi-official *Mission to Arnhem Land*, 1976, depicting the exposure on a headland close to the Elcho Island Mission headquarters of sculptured artefacts and 'bone posts, suggested treasures of the ancestral heroic past, together with a large cross, symbolising the passage from the past time to that of life under the Cross of Christ, is definitely a Shepherdson inspired interpretation adequately separating the Aboriginal mythology from the Christian, and leaving the Aboriginal past 'outside' the Christian sanctuary.

Thus it naturally follows that there is no photograph of the quite glorious coloured leadlight window in the T.T. Webb Memorial Church at Milingimbi, but as previously mentioned, particular emphasis is given to keeping Aboriginal artistic achievement *outside the Christian sanctuary* as at Elcho Island. Similarly with the great art boards in the Yirrkala Church, which formed the basis for the famous *Bark Petition* to Federal Parliament in Canberra, no mention was made of the opening of the Milingimbi Church (containing the window) and the Yirrkala Church containing the marvellous art boards so patiently decorated over a six-week period by the major artistic clan leaders. Shepherdson declined to attend either function (although he did on both occasions fly in one representative from Elcho Island Aboriginal community).

However, perhaps a more serious omission in the McKenzie book is the lack of emphasis on the stress caused particularly at Milingimbi and Elcho Island by the incursion of the first mining venture at Wessel Island, which failed. That was followed by the total 'buy out' of the mining property under auction, by the Methodist Mission, and later by the extraordinary exertions of the Yirrkala Aborigines in resisting the mining takeover as perpetrated on the people of Yirrkala as the Gove bauxite mine developed.<sup>6</sup>

An appalling omission in both the training for mission which is offered to those preparing for field work amongst the Australian Aborigines, both Christian and secular (a man training for Government welfare in the N.T. was in the same group as Edgar and Ann Wells at Sydney University) was that no guidance was given to the relevance of cave art and ancient dreaming as revealed in ancient literature and drama. For instance, Gilbert Murray, had suggested:

"In plays like Hamlet or the Agamemnon or the Electra we have certainly fine and flexible character study, a varied and well-wrought story, a full command of the technical instruments of the poet and the dramatist, but we have also, *I suspect, a strange unanalysed vibration below the surface, an underlying current of desires and fears and passions, long slumbering yet eternally familiar, which have for thousands of years lain near the root of our most intimate emotions and been wrought into the fabric of our most magic dreams.*"<sup>7</sup> (My Italics)

A short while after arriving at Milingimbi I received a letter from the Secretary of the Sydney Technical College and Art School asking for bark paintings suitable for a permanent record in preparation for a U.N.E.S.C.O. illustrated document, to be released as soon as possible. In obtaining bark paintings and quickly despatching them together with the limited information available, I became subject, as did the eminent art critic who wrote the subsequent Introduction, to the first stirrings of the subliminal influences arching from the bark paintings.

<sup>6</sup> Wells, A. E. *This Their Dreaming*. Queensland Uni. Press, 1971 & Wells, E. *Reward & Punishment in Arnhem Land*. AIAS, Canberra, 1982.

<sup>7</sup> Murray, G. *Hamlet and Orestes Classical Traditions in Poetry*. O.U.P., 1927

I learned much from the period of this early introduction to Aboriginal art forms in their several manifestations, including the epochal discovery of poetic form within associated legendary ceremonial stanza to the hidden clues, for those who could read the meaning within the lines, to almost every aspect of Aboriginal culture depicted on the bark paintings.<sup>8</sup> I came to appreciate, a little in awe, that the Aborigines had an intellectual world going back in time, but being apposite to every man who was open to it, yet archetypal, of unknown depth: to me a strange cognitive form of intuition I did not understand.

However, among the first publications attempting an explanation of Arnhemland art in general, the work of the late Professor A.P. Elkin and R. and C. Berndt was in my study by 1952. The authors of this fine work were all known to me, the Berndts having done research work as they accepted hospitality on Milingimbi Mission, and Professor Elkin as Professor of Anthropology at Sydney University in 1949.

Many of the Aborigines whose work receives mention in this particular work were known to me. Responsibility for much of the explanatory detail of the artefacts and weaving work could be traced to Milingimbi Mission Aborigines where several of the artists shared in the formation of early village type settlement. Many clan people came to Milingimbi on Fridays and of this number the majority became permanent members of the small community.

The foreword of Elkin/Berndt, chiefly concerned with the Murngin, says:

"There in Arnhem Land, a few of the remaining tribes lived untouched by modern science and industry, hunting and gathering their food, existing entirely on what nature produces. This finding of shelter and food, however, is only one aspect of their existence. They believe there is a personal or spiritual relationship between man and nature and that to trail the kangaroo is not enough - it is necessary so to influence it that it will stand within range, and to aim at the fish will not in itself assure accuracy - it must be drawn to the spear of the fisherman. For such purposes, charms, rites, paintings and sacred objects are employed."<sup>9</sup>

It so happens that the majority of Aborigines mentioned in the first major anthropological study of the 'Murngin' (W L Warner, *Black Civilization*, 1937) used Milingimbi Mission, as did Warner, as the only available source of local supplies. In the early days of missionary enterprise Milingimbi offered particular attraction. I became Superintendent of Milingimbi in late 1949. This is important in that there had been a Mission Station at Milingimbi (except for short breaks, i.e. World War II and station movements to Elcho Island fluctuations) since 1924! Also, most of the information revealed in the admittedly excellent production was obtained from Aboriginal persons whose semi-permanent place of residence was under European influences spread over almost 25 years! The Berndts on one occasion occupied the hospital sister's quarters as the nursing sister was on leave. At the Yirrkala mission site the same hospitality was enjoyed by all scholars prior to the first mining incursion from circa 1955. There was nowhere else to stay and no other source of 'European-style' provisions.

'The dawn of time period', ascribed by Elkin to the culture of the Aborigines whose artefacts and bark paintings were collected by the Berndts some time after 1946, had been produced after the shocks and 'after-shocks' of World War II. Air-strips were located at both Milingimbi and Yirrkala, with possibly up to 400 Australian airmen and accompanying militia forces combined. In addition, Milingimbi was bombed three times by the Japanese.

Describing neophytes under preparation for circumcision Elkin goes on:

<sup>8</sup> Wells, A.E. *op.cit.*, p.66

<sup>9</sup> Elkin, A.P. & Berndt, R. & C. *op.cit.* Chapter one.

"When they are said to be asleep as were the Two Sisters in their hut, the Julungul (great mythical python) in the shape of the trumpet" is taken from a special hut at one end of the ground. It is carried on the shoulders of two stooping men, and one man holds it at the mouth piece and blows: This is the voice of Julungul. It is moved slowly around the novices just as the Python moved round the Wauwelak's camp; for Julungul is said to swallow the novices at the circumcision ceremony and finally to vomit them out (as she disgorged the Wauwelak) as spiritually re-born youths."<sup>10</sup>

'Spiritually reborn' is a phrase from another cultural context, and does not adequately reflect the subliminal result flowing from the actual and long ceremonial ending in a deep clan-cultural sharing of resultant emotional mood. The neophyte youth has to accept personal bruising from circumcision. In some instances what can only be described as the physical shock resulting from circumcision, is a lasting type of melancholia, for others with strong physical endurance circumcision was the way to opportunistic bravado type exhibitionism; for the artistic, a sure way to an elite form of isolationism leading to prominence.

Having been quite captivated students of the Warner's *Black Civilization*, Ann, my wife, agreed with me that so great a repetitive similarity of ritual and legendary association still extant within the ceremonial life we were privileged to witness amongst the Aborigines indicated a pattern of psychic depth only realised in the exceptional rather than the average person within the Australian Aboriginal cultural system. An Aboriginal neophyte was not just simply 'reborn' as into another life within a separated group, but also 'confirmed' as an adult member within an enlarged social milieu. By this process he now had access to a priceless treasure of knowledge, most of it held in associated symbols and artefacts, including bark paintings, plus the accompanying oral traditions.

Most of the artefacts would have little meaning apart from the accompanying story; hence the need for the ceremonial gathering and the passing on of the oral/verbal symbols, using almost brutal physical associations, the combined kin and total social cohesion expressed in fervent and energetic accompaniments of music, dance and song (sometimes wailing), no doubt penetrating at a psychic as well as physical level. Senior Aborigines present at one important circumcision informed me that they could tell from the way the boys responded within the immediate aftermath of the ceremony who were going to be strong men in leading roles among their own clan.

It was only later when pondering the strange phenomenon of these nomads of life's road that T.S. Eliot in his *The Dry Salvages* seemed to offer a clue:

*past experiences revived in the meaning  
Is not the experience of one life only  
But of many generations - not forgetting  
Something that is probably quite ineffable.*<sup>11</sup>

I saw it as at least part of the business of a minister of religion, even though my people preferred to call me 'Bapa', to search for the 'seemingly ineffable'. During late 1954 the Australian edition of the U.N.E.S.C.O. volumes in their World Art series appeared, and from unknown sources I received a copy. (Inside the cover I have attached a letter dated 26 June 1952 and signed by Allan Thornton, secretary of the Sydney Technical Art College and thanking me for the bark paintings I sent down to him.) Some of these are in the now well-known early attempt to gain worldwide recognition of the significance of Aboriginal art. I was to share with Ann Wells a moment of intense pride that our sense of awareness of the immeasurable depths of cognitive value associated in the arts of the Aborigines and

sometimes expressed using artistic techniques as on bark paintings and some artefacts was shared by so important a figure as Sir Herbert Read, the doyen of English art critics.

"The final and most potent characteristic of these paintings has to be mentioned - their magic. Here again we must be careful not to confuse an anthropological term with the contemporary appropriation of the term in art criticism. The original magic of these paintings is forever closed to us; what is magically significant for the Aborigine is merely mumbo-jumbo for the European aesthete. Nevertheless, these paintings, by virtue of the images they project, have an archetypal significance for people of all races. Just as the *Junko Sisters*, well-creating, path-finding, object-naming mythical heroines, are authentic relatives of our familiars - Prometheus, Pandora, Ulysses - so the aboriginal symbols for such heroic figures find echoes in our collective unconscious. We cannot in our modern art authentically re-create such primitive magic; but in looking at these fascinating paintings we may still feel some tremor along our nerves of a primaevial terror."<sup>12</sup> (My Italics)

I was not aware at the time of Herbert Read's introductory essay in the UNESCO publication above referred to, until it actually reached Milngimbi in late 1954 and following my own encounter with Aboriginal archetypal symbolism. The insight of that paragraph and the discovery in 1970 that Read was a great follower of psychologist Jung, whose writings were unknown to me until after I left North Australia in 1964, opened new perspectives. My surprise and excitement when the manuscript *Jung and His Symbols*, published in 1964, was brought to my notice in 1970, can be imagined. The photographs in Jung's *Psychology* were obviously taken during Poignant's 1956 journey through North-East Arnhem Land. At the same time, Poignant worked on his lovely work *Picanniny Walkabout*, 1957, which illustrates children at play as well as doing a little hunting at Milngimbi.

Jung's book offers a series of photographs credited to Axel Poignant and obviously taken at Milngimbi Mission and at an Aboriginal ceremonial site on the Liverpool River, during my superintendency at Milngimbi, showing figures and faces of Aborigines well-known to me. All are exposed in positions of powerful ritual and symbolic significance. Circumcision and animal posturing are exposed in particular stages of involvement. The accompanying text goes on to relate the significant psychic values to the participants in acting out the assumed association with mythic figures of the past. So after all my own reaction at a personal level to this powerful field of Aboriginal archetypal forces was at least reasonable. To me the discovery of Jung's interpretation remains compelling.

One of Poignant's pictures from the Liverpool River area shows Aboriginal male figures pointing to important stones in a ritual context. I was to handle these stones myself at a later date and was reminded of a very ancient Hebrew story, the ancient text going back to five centuries before Herodotus (one of literature's early story-tellers) when Joshua declared as he called for certain stones "These stones will be a memory to Israel's sons forever" (Joshua 4:7 AV).

Perhaps the most important aspect of meaning within the Aboriginal system is the primary focus on food gathering and the land on which the food develops. Practically every bark painting has something to do with food or the place on which it can be found. Thus almost every traditional bark painting possesses a distinct clan identification with the 'right to gather' as well as to perform 'rites and accompanying ritual to ensure fertility' within the associated boundaries. In times of adverse climatic behaviour neighbouring clans always sought permission to enter other than their own privileged food resource area. This was absolutely essential in a truly nomadic society.

The directions given by various heroes and heroines of the past with respect to the finding of water, the coming of the seasons, clouds, and the language of birds and insects in an inter-

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>11</sup> Eliot, T.S. *The Dry Salvages: in Rosegarden and Labyrinth*, ed. Seonaid M. Robertson, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963

<sup>12</sup> Australian Aboriginal Paintings from Arnhem Land, UNESCO, 1954 *Preface*



related pattern, are handed down in the language as spoken and in the art as visually created. Movements of animal and plant life may be exposed in art, but the whispered accompanying word to the initiate becomes a well-held key to an inner life of the mind. It was this life of the mind that became our real interest. The only limitations for individual growth within the system are those associated with individual capacity of cognition. The brightest minds become the best artists and usually the leaders of the clan and the larger tribal structures. The capacity to memorize as well as innovate is paramount and the clue to the personal future.

In a personal explanation of Mawalan's (a Yirrkala man of significance in the field of art) 'The Thunder Man' bark painting given to Ann Wells in 1963 and accompanied by a pencilled special description, the artist went back in time to explain, using pencil marks, how extensions of Thunder Man's penis not only watered the earth, but with fine filtering strokes went on to water the yams in the ground. Similar extensions ran out from his limbs, spreading essential waters to cover the area of interest. Painting of Thunder Man usually takes pride of place on hearing the first rumbles of thunder, November and increasing to January when the real rain usually falls.

By working 'one's own landscape', a celebrant is generating forces within a prescribed area. Djawa of Milingimbi once explained to me that he made and painted his 'barks, at Milingimbi', but the purpose was in order that the emu would lay her eggs and have chicks on his own land, which was on the mainland and not at Milingimbi.

After viewing some, literally, dozens and dozens of small to larger size bark paintings in early years of encouragement of the arts, I came to realise that the children born at Milingimbi could not possibly enjoy what their parents took for granted in the seasonal returns from hunting. Hence the enormous pressures released at Milingimbi using art to provide not only the income to buy food, but also the stimulus to grow more through farming by 'sitting still' as the Aborigines talked of 'non-hunting' style of life. So improved was the atmosphere and the resultant harvest that the Northern Territory Department of Animal Husbandry sent out two officers who not only tested the cattle as possible T.B. carriers only to discover no trace of the sickness, but did a special review of the farming method and results, resulting in a special letter of high praise from the Board of Mission to the Superintendent of Milingimbi.

The encouragement of art and craft resulted in increased labour resources; payment for arts and crafts meant that the families of artists had access to food, other than through ration distribution. The increase in harvested amounts of garden produce meant the budget request for additional tractor power and so forth met with approval. Analysis reveals that quite startling agricultural returns, on average, equalled ten percent increase per annum. By 1957/58 Milingimbi art and craft income almost equalled the total of the other four mission stations under Methodist control. This return was, in my view, almost entirely due to a release of aspects of spiritual energy, emerging from the encouragement of the arts in any form presented. At the same time any reasonable request for assistance in the arrangements essential for the conduct of traditional ceremonial brought to the attention of the Superintendent through Djawa as the leader of the Aboriginal community was allowed, following serious discussion of the ritual involved.

The trip to the mainland with Baraldja, when I first heard Aboriginal poetry, caused ripples of depth in my own spiritual awareness, with external stimuli acting upon the mental processes. Other people, I am reminded, have also received great benefit, sometimes those in faraway lands, from similar situations.

C.M. Bowra in *Primitive Song*, records; No-one has stated this more fully than the Eskimo hunter Orpingalik.

Songs are thoughts sung out with the breath when people are moved by great forces and ordinary speech no longer suffices. Man is moved just like the ice-floe sailing here and there out in the current. His thoughts are driven by a flowing force when he feels joy, when he feels fear, when he feels sorrow. Thoughts can wash over him like a flood, making his breath come in gasps and his heart throb. Something like an abatement in the weather will keep him thawed up. And then it will happen that we who always think we are small will feel still smaller. And we will fear to use words. But it will happen that the words we need will come of themselves. When the words we want to use shoot up of themselves - we get a new song.<sup>13</sup>

Wordsworth in perhaps his best known stanzas managed to say: "Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey".

I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;  
A motion and a spirit that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still  
A lover . . . .

The poem ends with a direct address to his sister:

These steep woods and lofty cliffs,  
And this green pastoral landscape, were to me  
More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake!

Wordsworth, together with the poets of the Aborigines, draw from a deep pool of archetypal sources buried within the psyche of each group. However, the Greek and Jewish sources, the background to the Christian influences that moulded Wordsworth and his contemporaries, have not yet penetrated the Australian Aboriginal subconscious, which is the source of Aboriginal ritual, ceremonial, and art form, producing a distinctly different expression of spirituality. Here it will be of interest to you to know that the impressive photography of Jung's use of circumcision as well as the world coverage given to the same subject of archetypes in art by both UNESCO and the American 'Life' *Epic of Man* (1962) were taken in Arnhem Land for the most part at Milingimbi, and my name received credit for some of the accompanying text.

Nomadism as a cultural period had quite remarkable patterns of human behaviour. Traditional patterns of cultural behaviour were conceived as essential to the life-saving conduct of the society they represented. The initiation of Aboriginal youth is an entry into a closed society, within a general society, but it enables the interested to enter the ranks of the mystical and legendary, those figures of the past whose early heroic exploits have enabled the following clans to survive. My understanding is that something such as this explanation must be accepted stage by stage, or the psychic forces that undoubtedly harness the will of the individual will not flourish. The willing acceptance of the opportunity to learn quickly sorts out those of intellectual capacity and an elite type, based upon the intellectual growth within the system, quite quickly emerges. Clans and tribes are willing to pay within a guided system to those who can pass on both ancient and additional information to the local, as well as through the most gifted, to other groups. That most

<sup>13</sup> Bowra, C.M. *Primitive Song*, Cleveland Press, 1962, p.44

remarkable Aboriginal song-man Raiwalla, who accompanied anthropologist Donald Thompson on his coastal craft during the war years and carried on his great, but lonely, trips to far distant camps of Aborigines, exchanging ceremonial snippets accompanied by songs, was still a-roaming when I left Milingimbi in late 1960.

But Raiwalla, perhaps in his time the most seasoned traveller among his people, had not journeyed as far as Egypt, among the gods and goddesses of the mighty Nile, granary to many people in times of distress, as all peoples who read the Bible are aware. And so I find it 'passing strange', as some old-world people would express it, that in you will find photographs of the

underside lid of an Egyptian sarcophagus  
and a matching bottom side on which the body would  
rest in eternal sleep; that could have been painted  
by Djawa or Bininuywui of Milingimbi. Is it because  
Bees fly everywhere? But perhaps we may draw certain  
conclusions from our own classical art! Imagine my  
excitement when I found a leadlight window in a great  
English Church which emphasized a Rabbit Window displaying  
three rabbits, each with two ears but only three ears  
ears between them!! But wait - the Window is also a symbol  
of the Holy Trinity!<sup>14</sup>

Through the direct stimulation of all forms of Aboriginal art at Milingimbi and later at Yirrkala I not only came to know senior Aborigines (none but the initiated and elderly could pass on information of depth within the system), but some hundreds of isolated incidental and sometimes inner truth ideas and correlated items were exposed for my understanding. In many cases it was and has remained 'secret'. For instance, I went through the great Warner document with Warner's principal informants, and thus came into contact with really senior representative artists. Curiously enough Warner did not really collect Aboriginal art. He apparently thought it should remain with the owners as it carried deep wells of information. Warner's second edition of *Black Civilization* (1957) reveals how much he came to appreciate the friendships he made in Arnhem Land. Warner's personal collection of Aboriginal art was not more than five small barks at most, and these were distributed very selectively.

<sup>14</sup> Jung, C.C. *Man and His Symbols*, 1964, p.128-31

