



Majumbu ('Old Harry') and the Spencer-Cahill bark painting collection

Paul S. C. Taçon, Luke Taylor, Sally K. May, Joakim Goldhahn, Andrea Jalandoni, Alex Ressel & Kenneth Mangiru

To cite this article: Paul S. C. Taçon, Luke Taylor, Sally K. May, Joakim Goldhahn, Andrea Jalandoni, Alex Ressel & Kenneth Mangiru (2023) Majumbu ('Old Harry') and the Spencer-Cahill bark painting collection, *Australian Archaeology*, 89:1, 14-31, DOI: [10.1080/03122417.2023.2177949](https://doi.org/10.1080/03122417.2023.2177949)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03122417.2023.2177949>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 22 Feb 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1058



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Majumbu ('Old Harry') and the Spencer-Cahill bark painting collection

Paul S. C. Taçon^a , Luke Taylor^b , Sally K. May^c , Joakim Goldhahn^d , Andrea Jalandoni^a , Alex Ressel^e and Kenneth Mangiru^f

^aPlace, Evolution and Rock Art Heritage Unit (PERAHU), Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research and Australian Research Centre for Human Evolution, Gold Coast campus, Griffith University, Australia; ^bGriffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research, Gold Coast campus, Griffith University, Australia; ^cSchool of Humanities, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia; ^dCentre of Rock Art Research + Management, School of Social Science, UWA M257, Perth, Australia; ^eSchool of Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences, Griffith University, Australia; ^fInjalak Arts, Lot 383, Gunbalanya, Australia

ABSTRACT

From 1912, British anthropologist W. Baldwin Spencer and buffalo-shooter Paddy Cahill collected 163 bark paintings made by artists who also painted in rock shelters in western Arnhem Land, Northern Territory. Spencer made detailed notes about the bark paintings, secret/sacred objects, and other material culture he collected and some rock art, as well as genealogies and other details of the Aboriginal people he encountered but did not record the names of the artists. In general, the names and life stories of the individuals who made most Aboriginal archaeological artefacts or ethnographic objects and paintings now in museums across the world are not known. We have recently begun to address this for western Arnhem Land contact period art and in this paper focus on an elder, Majumbu ('Old Harry'), who made numerous rock paintings as well as at least eight of the Spencer-Cahill bark paintings. We use his work to begin a new interpretation of the importance of the Spencer-Cahill Collection in relation to land-based religion and show that knowing the names of the artists behind the collection, as well as related rock paintings, puts their work and the entire collection in new meaningful contexts.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 October 2022
Accepted 5 February 2023

KEYWORDS

Bark painting; rock painting; Paddy Cahill; W. Baldwin Spencer; Oenpelli; Arnhem Land; Majumbu

Introduction

Baldwin Spencer and Paddy Cahill were prescient in understanding the world importance of Aboriginal art from western Arnhem Land and their collecting activity, exhibition work and publications comprise an important base for ongoing research. The Melbourne Museum's Spencer-Cahill Collection of 163 bark paintings collected between 1912 and 1922 is considered a national treasure and foundation of the art market for bark paintings that continues to flourish in Arnhem Land (e.g. Berndt 1964; Carroll 1983; Goldhahn et al. 2021, 2022a; May 2006, 2010; Taylor 1996:20–24). There also are four Spencer-Cahill bark paintings in the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac (Paris) and one in the National Gallery of Australia collection. To extend the interpretation of this work, we examined, photographed and made 3D models of the bark paintings in Melbourne and analysed photographs of those in other collections. We also examined associated notebooks and letters in archives. One of the things that was evident from this was that the names of the

artists who made the paintings were, for the most part, not known, which led us to conduct focussed research on who may have made the paintings. By identifying some of the artists where this was not previously known, we are able to connect a portion of this major collection to its cultural context. This detailed archival research is a necessary complement to broader research efforts through anthropological and archaeological techniques, and involving community members, to elucidate the role of artists and the social action of their work in the formulation and communication of cultural meanings. Artistic creativity features in socialisation through the generations by depicting the power of the Ancestral Beings, helps bind individuals into an understanding of the Ancestrally created world, and facilitates adaptation to changing circumstances including contacts with outsiders.

Recently, Paddy Compass Namadbara was identified by us as someone who made at least two of the Spencer-Cahill bark paintings (Goldhahn et al. 2021, 2022a) and the names of other artists are emerging through our research, which is part of a project

CONTACT Paul S. C. Taçon  p.tacon@griffith.edu.au  Place, Evolution and Rock Art Heritage Unit (PERAHU), Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research and Australian Research Centre for Human Evolution, Gold Coast campus, Griffith University, QLD, Australia

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

called ‘Art at a Crossroads: Aboriginal responses to contact in northern Australia’ that began in 2021 (e.g. see May et al. 2021a). The project explores early bark paintings and recent rock paintings made during the late 1800s and early 1900s in the greater Awunbarna (Mount Borradaile) and Gunbalanya (Oenpelli) areas (Figure 1). In this paper, we focus on another individual only just identified by us as having made some of the bark paintings in the Spencer-Cahill Collection, a senior man named Majumbu who buffalo-shooter Paddy Cahill referred to as ‘Old Harry’ in his letters to Baldwin Spencer and in his notebooks (see below). He was from an area east of Oenpelli (now called Gunbalanya), had six wives and at least seven children by two of them, and, as explained below, appears to have made at least eight bark paintings that we know of. He also made rock paintings (Edwards 1979:54) and his descendants include co-author Kenneth Mangiru.

Paintings of animals, spirit figures and objects made on sheets of bark that formed huts were observed and sometimes collected from across Arnhem Land from the early 1800s (e.g. Campbell 1834:157). One of the earliest to be collected is of back-to-back male and female human-like figures collected at Port Essington by Naval Surgeon Richard Tilston before his death in 1849 (British Museum number Q73.Oc.17 and see Taçon et al.

2022:Figure 7). Paul Foelsche, Sub-Inspector, later Inspector-in-Charge of the Northern Territory Mounted Police, from 1870 to 1904, collected many bark paintings as well as other traditional objects from Aboriginal people residing on, or visiting Arnhem Land’s Cobourg Peninsula, north of Oenpelli (Taçon and Davies 2004). Cox (1878) was the first person to announce the scientific importance of bark paintings by presenting them to the Linnean Society of New South Wales on 26 August 1878. Bark paintings were also collected from Aboriginal bark shelters on Field Island in the late 1800s (Carrington 1890:73) and elsewhere.

Paddy Cahill, Baldwin Spencer and bark paintings

Paddy Cahill (1863–1923) was ‘a complex character who embodied the get-up-and-go of the energetic frontiersman, combined with solicitude for displaced Aboriginal people. Cahill is remembered in the Northern Territory as a renowned buffalo shooter, but he merits recognition for other achievements’ (Mulvaney 2004:vii). He arrived in Palmerston (later Darwin from 1911), Northern Territory with horses in 1891. He prepared his horses for racing, and especially for the 1891 Palmerston Cup, but he soon realised that big game hunting was a better source



Figure 1. Map of western Arnhem Land with key rock art research site locations for the ‘Art at a Crossroads: Aboriginal responses to contact in northern Australia’ project indicated (map by Andrea Jalandoni).

of income. 'By the time that he ceased hunting, it was believed that he shot 15,000 buffaloes' (Mulvaney 2004:12). He hunted in the Alligator Rivers region sporadically before arriving in an area east of the East Alligator River that later became known as Oenpelli in 1909 (Mulvaney 2004:3, 34). In 1910, he established Oenpelli as a base camp settlement and a place to pioneer tropical agriculture. The settlement soon attracted between 50 and 250 Aboriginal people at a time (Mulvaney 2004:vii) and Cahill employed many of them both for buffalo hunting and agriculture. In 1912, he was appointed Protector of Aborigines whereupon he 'combined empathy for and interest in traditional life and rituals with a stern paternalistic concern for displaced people whose self-respect and health he sought to sustain' (Mulvaney 2004:vii). Also in 1912, he met Baldwin Spencer who was 'commissioned for that year to formulate a blueprint for native administration and welfare policy' (Mulvaney 2004:viii). As part of this commission he spent two months with Cahill at Oenpelli and they became 'firm friends' (Mulvaney 2004:viii).

Baldwin Spencer (1860–1929) was foundation Professor of Biology at the University of Melbourne and an anthropologist with an interest in Australian Aboriginal art. He was also the Director of the National Museum of Victoria and took a strong personal interest in building its public displays (Mulvaney and Calaby 1985). He first encountered bark paintings in July 1912 during his two month stay with Paddy Cahill at his Oenpelli homestead (Mulvaney 2004; Spencer 1914, 1928). Spencer not only described the very positive impression they made on him but also that he then commissioned a series of works from some of the most skilled artists:

July 11th.—This morning a native brought in a little bark-drawing. They are very fond of drawing both on rocks and the sheets of bark of which their Mia-mias are made ... They are so realistic, always expressing admirably the characteristic features of the animal drawn, that anyone acquainted with the original can identify the drawings at once ... They were so interesting that, after collecting some from their studios, which meant taking down the slabs on which they were drawn, that formed, incidentally, the walls of their Mia-mias, I commissioned two or three of the best artists to paint a series of canvases, or rather 'barks', the price of which was governed by size, varying from one stick of tobacco (a penny halfpenny) for a two-foot by one-foot 'bark', to three sticks (fourpence halfpenny) for 'barks' measuring approximately three feet by six feet and upwards. The subject-matter I left entirely to the artist's choice. As a result I was able to secure some fifty examples that illustrate the present stage of development of this aspect of art amongst the Kakadu people. It was interesting to find that the natives themselves very clearly distinguished between the ability of different artists and that my own non-expert opinion in

regard to their relative merits coincided with their own. The majority of those that I collected and that now hang in the National Museum at Melbourne are regarded as first-rate examples of first-rate artists. The highest price paid was actually fourpence halfpenny but, as the artists are now unfortunately dead, the market value for the 'barks' is considerably higher than when they were originally purchased in the Kakadu studios at Oenpelli (1928:792–794).

In 1914, Cahill sent a further 64 painted figures on sheets of bark to Spencer, said to be copies of rock paintings (Melbourne Museum P. Cahill file Northern Territory 1914–1923, Letter to Spencer dated 11/06/1914 and Cahill No. 26). Over the following years the collection grew to 163 bark paintings, with the most recent made in 1922. Cahill did not have a focused method for collecting bark paintings and his main aim appears to have been to provide Spencer with a wide range of subject matter that would be of interest to him and to generate some form of income for particular artists (e.g. see above quote by Spencer re. payment).

Paddy Cahill's notebooks and letters to Baldwin Spencer

In one of Paddy Cahill's notebooks, dated 3 June 1914 (Melbourne Museum number XM 1704)¹, he refers to a bark painting of a male human-like figure that has a face consisting of two large eyes, bushy hair or headdress and infill dominated by diamond designs. He listed it as bark painting Figure 16 and after he sent it to Baldwin Spencer it was later registered into the National Museum of Victoria (now the Melbourne Museum) collection in 1918 as object 263810 (see Figure 2). The bark sheet is 1.695 metres by 0.750 metres in size and Cahill's notes next to the entry for bark painting 16 state 'Koo-choo-mundi (country) Man' and he added 'only seen by Old Harry'. The painting was attributed to Kunwinjku people by Gunbalanya artists Gabriel Maralngurra, Gersham Garlngarr and Graham Badari when they visited the museum in 2006, according to the Museum register.

In another entry, Cahill refers to a particular bark painting with three subjects (images 5, 6 and 7 in his list) as having depictions of 'Komali fish' and 'To get particulars from Old Harry'. This suggests an Aboriginal artist known as 'Old Harry' made

¹XM 1704. Paddy Cahill Collection. Notebook dated as starting 3 June 1914 that documents multiple collections sent to Baldwin Spencer in Melbourne. Notebook sent to Melbourne after his death by his wife. Features identifications of bark painting and mardayin subject matter by Aboriginal language term, spelt phonetically and with corrections marked by him in red. Numbered according to his chalk numbers on works. Accession numbers of the Museum written next to listed objects.

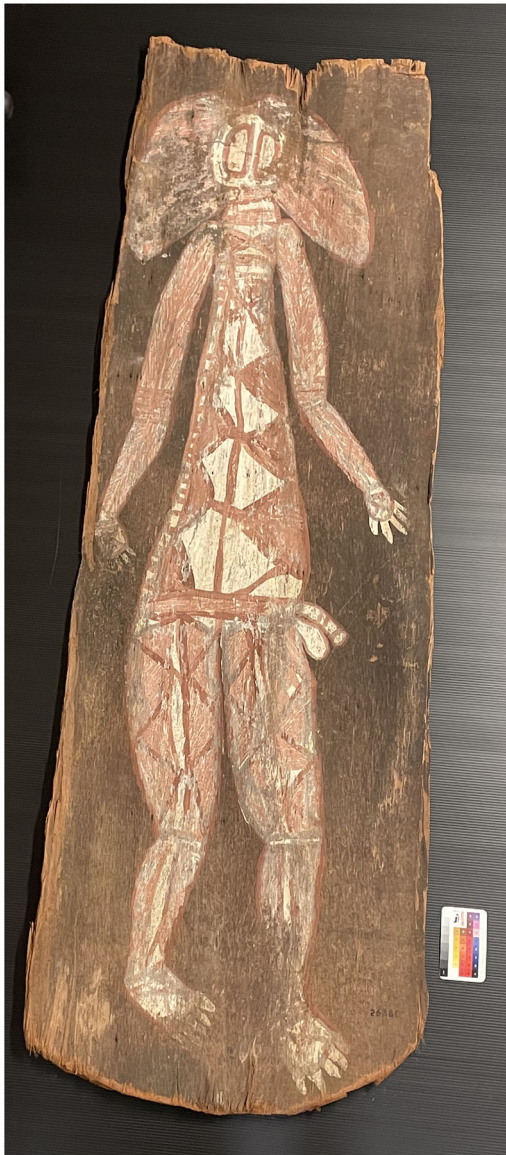


Figure 2. Bark painting of a male human-like figure that only 'Old Harry' could see according to Paddy Cahill, made in 1914 and part of the Spencer-Cahill Collection (photograph by P. Taçon, Melbourne Museum, object 26381, object size 1.695 metres by 0.750 metres).

these paintings, especially the human-like figure only he could see (see above). Unfortunately, the painting with the fish went missing in 1965 but may be a bark painting with three fish in the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris (Branly 75.1935.9.4).

Koo-choo-mundi is the Tin Camp Creek area, today spelt Kudjumarndi (e.g. see Gunn 1988). As Gunn (1988:7) notes 'Drainage in the Kudjumarndi area is focused on Tin Camp Creek, a major tributary of the East Alligator River'. There are many recent rock paintings at sites in this region, including some of introduced subject matter (e.g. Edwards 1979; Gunn 1988; May et al. 2021b; Taçon et al. 2021) and human-like figures with diamond infill similar to that of the bark painting (e.g. Gunn 1988:61, Figure 11).

Old Harry is mentioned in a number of Paddy Cahill's letters to Baldwin Spencer, written between 1913 and 1917. For instance, in a 19 October 1913 letter to Spencer, Cahill talks about 'Jimmy (Kul-un-gwutcher tribe)', who Spencer had met in 1912 and comments 'You remember, the little short chap that used to dance Muraian, a great mate of Old Harry's', implying that Spencer had also met Old Harry in 1912. Cahill again referred to 'Old Harry' in a letter to Baldwin Spencer dated 20 March 1914:

Old Harry's crowd are camped at birreeduck about twelve miles ENE along Spencers Range. They come in for tobacco, so I made them understand that anything that they get from me; they must give me something in return, so they send along sugar bag (Mormo), the last lot they brought filled a small washing tup (sic), so my crowd had a glorious feed of honey (in Mulvaney 2004:93 and see Pitt Rivers Museum PRM Box 4 Cahill 7, page 4).

The 'birreeduck' location today is known as Birriduk Creek, in the greater Nabarlek area, where there are also many rock art sites with contact period art including introduced subject matter (e.g. see Edwards 1979). Later, in a letter to Baldwin Spencer dated 19 June 1914 (Pitt Rivers Museum PRM Box 4, Cahill 9, page 1), Cahill states:

I am sending you in this letter a list of Mariain totems and descriptions of their use. I hope that they will reach you alright. At the same time I am sending you (64) sixty four copies of rock drawings, on bark, I have numbered them all, and written out their names as near phonetically as I can (you will have to put the spelling in the proper form) and I hope that you will be able to understand their meaning. The totem drawing of a stick about 5 feet long, you mentioned in your november letter, is a CHOO-NARA, (a yam). It was brought to Mrs Cahill while I was away from home. It belongs to the Koo-Long-Goo-Chee people. Old Harry is one of the tribe. Their country is about thirty miles ENE from here.

The Kulunglutji (Koo-long-Goo-Chee; also referred to as Kul-un-gwutche in the 1913 letter above) people were from an area immediately northeast of the Gembio people and the Tin Camp Creek area, as well as immediately west of Birridul (Birriduk; Cahill's Birreeduck) Creek according to Spencer (1914:6–7). Kestevan (1984:53) records that the term Kulunglutji could be the Mengerrdji word for Kunwinjku, which accords with the 2006 painting attribution by Gunbalanya (Oenpelli) based artists (see above).

Old Harry and his family appear to have been frequent visitors to Oenpelli. For instance, in a 24 May 1916 letter to Spencer, Cahill states 'One little chap (Old Harry's son 6 years of age) fell from a tree & 2 pieces of wood went into his thigh, and

made nasty wounds on the poor little chap. I got the last piece of stick out this morning, and now he will shortly be alright (the natives say)' (Pitt Rivers Museum PRM Box 4, Cahill 14 and see Mulvaney 2004:112). However, this is followed by a 21 July 2016 letter to Spencer in which Cahill states:

The day before I left I injected cocaine into the leg of a small boy, (who had fallen off a tree and got badly staked about two months before) I probed and found that a piece of stick had nearly gone through the thigh, I opened the thigh and took out a piece of stick. The stick was jammed right on to the thigh bone and the wonder was, that mortification had not set in. (Pitt Rivers Museum PRM Box 4, Cahill 14, pages 2–3 and see Mulvaney 2004:114)

This is referred to again in a letter to Spencer dated 10 October 1917 and it was stated by Cahill that 'now only a small scar can be seen' (in Mulvaney 2004:123) as well as in a 30 June 1917 letter to H.E. Carey, Chief Protector of Aborigines, Darwin (see below).

Old Harry and his family

Journalist Elsie Masson (1915:117–118) provides another eyewitness account of Old Harry and his family. Born in Melbourne in 1890, Masson's family were close friends of the Spencers. Her father (Professor Orme Masson) was a colleague of Baldwin Spencer at Melbourne University. She found herself in Darwin in 1913 working as an au pair to the family of Dr John Gilruth, Administrator of the Northern Territory (Lydon 2016, 2018). During her time in the Northern Territory, Masson visited Oenpelli. She was particularly impressed with Old Harry's stature and the fact that he had six wives:

Foremost amongst the wild natives was a grey-bearded warrior known as Harry. He should have been called Henry the Eighth, however, for he has six wives, all of whom he had brought with him. Henry the Eighth was a majestic sight, as he stalked, tall, gaunt, and solemn, across the yard, with his small son and heir perched high on his shoulders, while the six wives, some young and comely, others old and hideous, trailed meekly behind (Masson 1915:118).

Masson also photographed Harry and his family as there are two photos said to be of them in the Pitt-Rivers Museum collection attributed to her (e.g. Figure 3).

A year earlier, in 1912, Baldwin Spencer photographed an unidentified man who matches Harry's description as given by Masson, and closely resembles the man said to be Harry in her photograph, with seven women, six wives and a daughter, as well as three other children, when he visited Oenpelli in

1912 (Figure 4 and see Spencer 1914: Figure 9, between pages 6–7). The caption with the photograph says 'Gembio Family, Man with Six Wives' (although the caption for the same photograph in Spencer 1928:780, Figure 517 says seven wives, a confusion with a Kakadu man named Monmuna with seven wives discussed by Spencer in 1914:48–49). In the photograph the man's eldest son stands to his left and has a clay pipe strapped to his arm. Spencer (1914:48) commented that:

The relatively small number of children is not infrequently to be noticed amongst these tribes. While I was at Oenpelli a man of the Geimbio tribe, closely allied to the Kakadu, came into camp with his family including six wives, but only four children. The age of the wives must have varied from fifteen to fifty.

Nalerwit and Majumbu

In a list of Aboriginal patients Cahill treated in 1916 he includes 'Nal-er-wit M, small boy fell from tree and badly staked, operated on and stake taken out' (Cahill 1917:49 and see 1917:47 for full account of the accident and procedure, as well as above). The boy who fell out of the tree is, thus, Frank Nalowerd (alternative spellings Nalerwit, Naluwad, Nalowed, Nullowed and others – see May et al. 2020b:304). We also know that anthropologist 'Robert Levitus was told by Frank Nalowerd at Narbarlek (sic) that Gagadju and Gunwinjku people, including his father and grandfather, took bark paintings, spears and woomearas to Cahill in return for food and tobacco' (Mulvaney 2004:60). The Aboriginal name of Frank Nalowerd's father was Majumbu (see Cole 1975:24; Edwards 1979:54; McKeown 1989:10–11, 25–26). Therefore, Majumbu and Old Harry are the same person. He belonged to the Madjawarr clan.

Historian Keith Cole (1975) who lived at Oenpelli noted that 'Majumbu's family has been of importance for Oenpelli. By his first wife, Badjbadjuk, he had a son Namadomarndo, the father of Hannah by Kararu, and two daughters Ngalgalgdjam and Ngalberreh-gdjamban; and by his second wife Ngaldorogdjamban, Nalowerd, Garmarradj (Joseph) and two daughters, Djalagalgal (Peggy's mother) and Galinjigalinji' (Cole 1975:23–24). Kararu (also known as Sarah) was born c. 1895 and buried at Oenpelli on 30 September 1954.

Majumbu was buried in a rock shelter near Birriduk Creek called Djerlum and his bones were still there in 1988 (McKeown 1989:13). Co-author Kenneth Mangiru's great grandfather is Majumbu, his grandfather is Namadomarndo and his mother is Hannah Mangiru. David Namilmil Mangiru,



Figure 3. Photograph of man believed to be Harry and his family by Elsie Masson (photograph courtesy of the Pitt Rivers Museum, object 1998.306.60, 1913).

Kenneth's father, worked with Robert Edwards (1979:60) in the 1970s to identify rock paintings, including contact period rock art in the Djarrng area, between Nabalek and Tin Camp Creek and also was a bark painter (e.g. 1948 bark paintings in Ryan 1990:84–85). Kenneth belongs to the Danek clan. At Djarrng in September 2019, Kenneth stated both his father and grandfather were rock painters and buffalo shooters (Taçon et al. 2021:127), confirming his link to these artists who both created artworks on rock and bark.

Rock art by Majumbu

Anthropologist/archaeologist Bob Edwards (1979), who documented numerous rock art sites in the Alligator Rivers region of Kakadu/Arnhem Land in the early 1970s, emphasised the importance of a rock shelter where Majumbu painted on the walls. It is called Djimuban (in the Kabulurr area) 'about

sixteen kilometres north-west of Nabarlek near Birraduk Creek' (1979:54), where Cahill said Old Harry camped:

The rock painting site is of special importance to Joseph Giradbul and his brother, Frank Nalowed (Nabulanj sub-section; *Yarri-burrik* semi-moiety; Nangarrandjku and Dua moieties). Their father (*Majumbu*) painted in the shelter some sixty years ago when it was used as a wet weather camp for his family. Evidence of occupation is present on the shelter floor in the form of bones, ash and other debris.

Joseph claimed that the figures were painted on the walls before his father went hunting to give some 'help' in the chase. Sometimes figures were commenced before leaving to hunt and would be completed upon return.

The main central figure is of a crocodile in X-ray style and nearby is a kangaroo ... Barramundi, catfish and other species, also figure in the gallery. There are colourful spirit figures, and hand stencils. (1979:54–56)



Figure 4. 1912 Baldwin Spencer photograph 'Gambio Family, Man with Six Wives' (photograph courtesy of the Melbourne Museum).

'Sixty years ago' for Edwards would be 1912–1914 as the study was done in 1972 and a report published in 1974 (Edwards 1979:ix). This is also when Spencer and Cahill were active commissioning and collecting bark paintings from artists, including, we argue below, Old Harry/Majumbu. George Chaloupka photographed the Djimuban rock paintings in November 1974 when he visited the rock shelter with Frank Nalowerd (Figure 5).

Northern Land Council anthropologist Frank McKeown visited Djimuban with Joseph 'Girrbul' (also referred to as Girrabbul, Giradbul, Garmarradj) while undertaking an archaeological survey in 1988, describing it as follows:

An old camp site used by Joseph Girrbul's father Madjumbu. The walls are covered in an array of stunning rock art. Joseph (27/7) points to a magnificent x-ray crocodile painted by his father, and to a kangaroo painted by his brother Frank (Namadomado). Other paintings include those of barramundi, wallaby, male and female figures, mimi, hand stencils, catfish, horse, nail fish and emu. Joseph was here when a small boy. People formerly travelled along Coopers creek from Minrndabal's camp (Mangardabu) to Djimubarn. The shelter is still used and we found evidence of

recent occupation. As well as paintings we observed beeswax dots on one rock face and several bowls worn into the surface of the rock (1989:10–11).

McKeown (1989:25–26) further states:

The shelter is an old camp and is covered with paintings. The shelter is in fact a huge overhang some 50 metres long and 40 metres high. One of the paintings a yellow human like figure is the cultural havoc (sic) Nanoongberg. JG [Joseph Girrabbul], TN 27/7. Nanoongberd came from Kudjumarndi looking for sugarbags. Other paintings include a hand stencil, branch, spirits (namande), human figures, kangaroo, freshwater crocodile in x-ray style (drawn by Madjumbu, Joseph's father), an x-ray kangaroo (drawn by Joseph's brother Frank), bi-chrome human figures (white with red outline with pronounced testicles), Namorodo, Namarkon, horse, fish, mimi, two sailing ships in white monochrome, a frog. The overhang runs roughly east west, with paintings to west somewhat faded while the paintings to the east are well preserved. TN [Timothy Nadjowk] remembers camping here as a child and witnessed a major fight in which Jerry Djirriminmin received a severe cut in his head. T. does not remember the cause of the fight but suggests it may have been over women. People used as weapons spears and ironwood waddies. People used paperbark for



Figure 5. Frank Nalowerd at Djumuban with crocodile and other rock paintings (photograph by George Chaloupka, November 1974, courtesy of the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory).

blankets. HG [Harry Marralngurra] and JG [Joseph Girrabbul] sing out to Naroongberd as we take our leave.

With seven Gunbalanya (Oenpelli) Aboriginal community members we relocated Djimuban in September 2022 and found that although the paintings had faded the crocodile was still visible. Change such as this at sites where rock paintings were made in the early to mid-1900s is not unusual, especially if images were created with white pigment, such as kaolin, or if there had been extreme weather events, such as cyclones, that impacted rock art sites (e.g. see Taçon et al. 2021).

Bark paintings by Majumbu

By comparing the brushwork, style and general manner of depiction exhibited in Majumbu/Old Harry's human-like painting on bark (Figure 2) with his rock paintings, and to other bark paintings in the Spencer-Cahill Collection, it can be seen that they share many similarities in terms of form, style and general manner of depiction. For instance, they all have similar hatch infill (rarrk) which features gently curving parallel lines of varying thickness, characteristic of Majumbu's style but not of other bark or rock artists who painted parallel hatch lines of similar thickness. Some of the human-like figures have an extra digit on their hands. Majumbu also often painted an X on hands and/or feet of human-

like and some animal figures. Furthermore, when eyes are shown they are on stalks or are represented as rectangles, human-like figures have diamond patterning for some of their infill and there is a central division of limbs and bodies.

Some other artists in the region also incorporated X and diamond designs in their style, and/or painted eyes on stalks, but many also did not, as evidenced by both recent rock paintings and bark paintings. For instance, prolific rock painter Nayombolmi often used diamond designs in his depictions of human-like figures made from the early 1900s up until the mid-1960s (e.g. see Goldhahn et al. 2022b; Haskovec and Sullivan 1989). One of the elements that is characteristic of Majumbu's paintings and not Nayombolmi's is diamond designs throughout the torso, including next to the backbone, as well as the legs. For Nayombolmi the diamond designs are on the legs and never in the torso next to the backbone. Nayombolmi's diamond designs are always bisected vertically while Majumbu's are sometimes bisected this way, occasionally bisected horizontally and often not bisected at all. Besides the paintings discussed below, there are no others in the Spencer-Cahill bark painting collection with these features. And the more one looks at the paintings attributed to Majumbu, below, the more resemblances between them can be found. For instance, when heads are in profile the mouth is open, hair is on one side and



Figure 6. Kulunglatji (Kunwinjku) bark painting of a spirit called Mununlimbir similar in style to [Figure 2](#) (photograph courtesy of the Melbourne Museum, object 019921, registered on 22 September 1914; object size is 1.845 metres by 0.830 metres).

there is a small beard if it has male genitalia. All but two of the paintings that we argue below are likely to be Majumbu's are listed in the Melbourne Museum records and Cahill's notebooks as made by Kulunglutji people.

Paintings likely to have been made by Majumbu include a very similar human-like figure to that in [Figure 2](#) that also has diamond design infill, comparable hatch infill, as well as similar body, face and hair/headaddress structure ([Figure 6](#)). It is similar to human-like figures painted in the Djimuban rock shelter that have diamond infill, X designs on hands, similar long thin fingers, sometimes an extra finger and other features (see below). It is described in the museum register as:

A spirit called Mununlimbir by the Kulunglatji tribe. It is supposed to roam about in search of honey bags. The face is very conventional; there are two eyes, no mouth, and very bushy hair. The backbone is shown, and the leg-bones are indicated; there is no attempt to depict the internal anatomy, but the trunk is decorated with a design that differs on each side of the third line. There is an extra finger on each hand, but no toes are drawn. A bag to carry the honey is hung from each elbow. See P. Cahill file Northern Territory 1914–1923. Letter to Spencer dated 11/06/1914. Cahill No. 26.

The largest bark in the Spencer-Cahill Collection is dominated by a painting of a crocodile that measures 2.94 m × 1.03 m (9.65 feet × 3.34 feet). It was registered on 22 September 1914 and is described in the museum register as:

Crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*) - x-ray style and stencilled hands. The alimentary canal is shown in the lower part of the drawing and the backbone down the middle of the body. White blocks outlined with black above the backbone in the trunk region probably indicate the prominent rows of scales on the back of the animal. Near the crocodile's head are the stencilled hands and forearms of a child. (Register) This is the largest known bark painting in existence. Refer to register for more information. Cahill numbers 1–64 are copies of rock drawings. See P. Cahill file Northern Territory 1914–23. Letter to Spencer dated 11/06/1914. Cahill No. 26 (Register).

The painting is attributed to 'Gaagudju' (Kakadu) people but the crocodile is almost identical to one painted by Majumbu at the Djimuban rock art site (see [Figures 7](#) and [8](#) as well as [Edwards 1979:27, Plate 10 middle](#)). The infill has brush strokes from two individuals and may have been painted by Majumbu with the help of his oldest son Namadormarndo (Namadomado), as they both made rock paintings at Djimuban ([McKeown 1989:10–11](#)) and sometimes senior western Arnhem Land artists worked with younger apprentices on specific paintings ([Taçon 1989](#); [Taylor 1996](#)). The predominate hatch infill of the crocodile shows gently curving lines of varying thickness. The curving is produced as the hand of the artist rotates around the wrist. Sometimes the hatched lines converge accidentally. This personal style can be contrasted with the work of other artists represented in the collection who prefer straight hatching that is always parallel. On the crocodile head there is some tentative crosshatching that suggests the work of another artist and was interpreted as the work of Majumbu's son by the Injalak artist Shaun Namarnyilk in 2022. Importantly, the hatch infill in the crocodile is similar to that in [Figures 2](#) and [6](#), as well as the other bark paintings from the Spencer-Cahill collection discussed below. The bark sheet also has two child hand-and-arm stencils of similar size with internal



Figure 7. Large painting of a crocodile attributed to Majumbu along with two child hand stencils (photograph courtesy of the Melbourne Museum, object 019930, object size 2.940 metres by 1.030 metres).



Figure 8. Crocodile rock painting by Majumbu at the Djimuban rock art site (from photograph by George Chaloupka, courtesy Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory).

Painted designs that may be those of one of his younger sons, possibly Joseph Garmarradj (Girabul) or Frank Nalowerd.

The crocodile rock and bark paintings are very similar in lots of ways, including their general shape and form, the unusual shape of the head, tail design, torso design, internal organs and front limbs. The eyes on curved stalks (representing optic nerves) are almost identical. The use of a dark third colour also relates it to the crocodile work on bark; the general format of its arms and legs, and the diamond infill, relates it to Figures 2 and 6. The rear limbs are oriented differently, but this is likely to be because of the limitation of the size of the bark sheet. The crocodile bark differs in terms of having X designs on the feet, but this feature helps link it to other bark paintings we attribute to Majumbu, such as

Figure 9 that has X designs on the hands and eyes on curved stalks.

In the museum register the entry for Figure 9 states:

A spirit figure. Frontal and side views are combined and from the elbows hang dead men's bones. The figure is possibly a Namandi who was sometimes a human ghost antagonistic to man. Representations such as this were made by artists to illustrate a story of personal experience. 'Nuojobabipi', the 'Debil-Debil' that eats the flesh of dead natives. Kakadi Tribe. See letter 11.6.14.

However, as with the crocodile bark painting, the attribution to 'Kakadi' (Kakadu) people is likely to be a mistaken afterthought.

Another Spencer-Cahill Collection bark painting we attribute to Majumbu is of a spirit being called



Figure 9. Nuojorabipi, the 'Debil-Debil' that eats the flesh of dead natives (photograph courtesy of the Melbourne Museum, object 020055, registered on 22 September 1914, object size 1.414 metres by 0.775 metres).

Warraguk that eats honey (Figure 10). As with most of the other bark paintings mentioned above, it was registered on 22 September 1914. It is 1.7 metres by 0.75 metres in size and the Museum register states that it is:

A gnome or sprite called Warraguk, in the Kulunglutji tribe. This also eats honey-bags. The head is very conventional, the two large yellow patches outlined with red perhaps representing the eyes, and the white line between them the nose. Possibly the median drawing in the trunk is the backbone; on each side of it is a design with white diamond-shaped patches on the right, and others with crossed red lines on the left. A membrane suggestive of that of the flying fox runs along each side...

Cahill numbers 1–64 are copies of rock drawings. See P. Cahill file Northern Territory 1914–1923. Letter to Spencer dated 11/06/1914. Cahill No. 26.



Figure 10. Painting of a spirit being called Warraguk that eats honey (photograph courtesy of the Melbourne Museum, object 019916, object size 1.700 metres by 0.750 metres).

The face, consisting of two rectangular eyes, is very similar to that of the spirit depicted in Figure 2, as is the body structure, the curving hatch infill and the diamond design infill. The curving style of hatch infill is also similar to that in the crocodile paintings (Figures 7 and 8) as well as the other spirit paintings (Figures 2 and 6).

There is also a painting of a Ngormo spirit (Figure 11) in the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris that has a Cahill-like 1914 number 22 in white at the bottom, beneath the figure's feet. It measures 1.02 metres by 0.24 metres. The body structure, curving hatch infill, X designs on the feet, diamond designs and other features suggest it also is a Majumbu painting.

In the Spencer-Cahill collection in Melbourne there is one bark painting of a female human-like figure (Figure 12). It is red, white and black like the crocodile and one of the spirit figures described



Figure 11. Painting of a Ngormo spirit with Majumbu style features (photograph courtesy of the © Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Michel Urtado/Thierry Ollivier, object 71-1935-9-3, object size 1.070 metres by 0.240 metres).

above (Figure 9), has diamond designs on the legs and torso, curving hatch infill, legs that curve to the right and an extra finger on its remaining hand, as with some of Majumbu's other human-like figures. However, the painting also resembles female human-like figures made by Nayombolmi at



Figure 12. Bark painting of a red, white and black female human-like figure with curved hatching, diamond designs, legs curving to the right and an extra finger on the remaining hand (photograph courtesy of the Melbourne Museum, object X26353, object size 1.230 metres × 0.570 metres).

numerous rock art sites, including the famous 1963–1964 Nourlangie panel visited by thousands of tourists each year (Goldhahn et al. 2022b; May et al. 2019, 2020a). Nayombolmi visited Oenpelli frequently and was related to Majumbu through marriage. For instance, there are accounts of him being speared there in 1926 (Goldhahn et al. 2022b:159–160). At Djimuban there are two yellow, red and purple female human-like figures below and to the left of the crocodile that have some of the same features, including body form with legs curving to the right (Figures 5 and 13). However, they have diamond designs like Nayombolmi's rather than Majumbu's, including being confined to the legs of the figures and not placed in the torsos.



Figure 13. Two red, yellow and purple rock paintings of female human-like figures below and to the left of the crocodile at the Djimuban rock shelter that have the same features, including body form with legs curving to the right (photograph by P. Taçon).

Furthermore, yellow was a colour Nayombolmi frequently used as it is associated with Yirritja moiety, as he was. If the bark painting was made by Nayombolmi he would have been about 17 at the time, given he was born about 1895 and the painting is one of the first batch collected by Spencer in 1912. We cannot say definitely that this bark painting was made by Majumbu or Nayombolmi but it is unlikely it was made by any other artist given the resemblance to many aspects of both Majumbu's and Nayombolmi's paintings. Another possibility is that it is a very early example of master and apprentice working on a painting together.

Discussion

This paper has presented evidence that Majumbu's bark painting of an estuarine crocodile and some human-like figures in the Spencer/Cahill collection are copies of and/or very similar to rock paintings. In his letters to Baldwin Spencer, Paddy Cahill refers to some of the bark paintings as 'copies of

rock paintings' and Spencer's biographers Mulvaney and Calaby (1985:303) speculate that Spencer may have specifically requested such work. However, the exact details of this commissioning arrangement were not recorded by Spencer or Cahill. Spencer was concerned about the impacts of modernity upon the 'traditional' materials that he was researching, including material culture, and he likely wished to minimise the impact of his engagements as part of the collection process (Clifford 1988:189–214; Goldhahn et al. 2021; Taylor 2015).

Spencer possessed broad experience of Aboriginal arts and other world arts and he immediately understood that western Arnhem Land was a major art province. He also wished to develop an extensive collection for the National Museum of Victoria displays. Spencer wanted portable examples to promote his research on art, conceived by some people to represent the earliest stages of human development in a social Darwinist frame. Spencer identifies the unique anatomical detailing that features in both the rock art and the bark painting. He interpreted this

x-ray art as revealing Gagadju interest in the magical increase of food animals, beliefs that were considered part of social forms that precede developed religion (Spencer 1914:187–188; Spencer 1928:810; Taylor 2015, 2019). However, Spencer's 1914 and 1928 publications present the results of his productive approach to conducting long term and systematic research into the varying Aboriginal social organisations across a vast area; they document the travels of Ancestral Beings and their associated creation of sites; present ideas regarding the conception of individuals from such sites; and discuss the reincarnation of names relating to the Ancestor. With developments in the understanding of Aboriginal religion, and analysis of the Majumbu data, this magnificent collection can be reinterpreted to reveal its relationship to the Ancestral realm.

Spencer's interpretations regarding the magical increase of food species were a product of his time. He was in close contact with theorists in England, particularly Sir James George Frazer, who facilitated the publication of his work and understood the development of religion in terms of human evolutionary models (Jones 1988; Mulvaney and Calaby 1985; Mulvaney et al. 1997). Some researchers have contrasted Spencer's work with his contemporaries such as Carl Strehlow (1907–1920) and Géza Róheim (1932, 1945) who developed a stronger sense of the way the Ancestor, and Ancestrally created country, becomes animate in contemporary people, albeit from theoretical perspectives that also introduce bias (Austin-Broos 1999; Rumsey 1999). In reinterpreting Spencer's writings and collections, subsequent researchers also have the benefit of more recent formulations of Aboriginal religion by authors such as Stanner (1963) and Munn (1970, 1973) who have articulated the lineaments of the uniquely embedded character of Aboriginal religion where Ancestral creations of the land and its species are linked with ideas concerning the spiritual identity of individuals (Rumsey 1999). The Ancestors formed the original features of Country and continue to exist inside its earth and waters: maintaining the cycles of life and seasonality; rejuvenating the fertility of all animals and plants; ensuring the spiritual continuities of human generations through time. As a reflection of this thinking, Ancestral Beings are understood to have the power to manifest in different forms: as features of landscape, as human-like entities, as animal-like beings, or as sacred artefacts including ceremonial paintings. The different manifestations are understood to be spiritually continuous. This religious perspective embeds relationships between many different orders of experience in a multidimensional nexus. Artists may use paintings to represent the Ancestors in any of

these forms in order to teach their audiences about aspects of creation. Because of these developments, we now understand that a painted representation of an animal form may well also incorporate 'inside' meanings relating to the Ancestral realm.

Spencer's interpretation of the paintings was also practically constrained because he could not clarify Gagadju totemic arrangements and thus gain insight into the relationship of the artist's social identity with that of the subject matter of the works (1914:179–183). The difficulty is likely to be due to the existence of two systems for classifying species in the area; by matrilineal semi-moieties or patrilineal clans (Berndt and Berndt 1970:53–66). Spencer describes 'regional groupings' for the Gagadju and broadly sketches the mosaic of land ownership by language groups although today we understand that the primary land-owning groups are patrilineal clans (Berndt and Berndt 1970; Harvey 1992). Perhaps Cahill, who had lived in the area for some years, implicitly acknowledged this more detailed patrilineal land-owning framework as working knowledge when he noted that he must ask 'Old Harry' about the full details of other subjects by this artist and their relationship to the Nabarlek area.

With the benefit of greater knowledge of the western Arnhem Land region, we may return to Spencer's records and those of other researchers to fill out our understanding of the subject matter of the paintings. In relation to Majumbu's painting of the Estuarine Crocodile, it is important to draw in information from areas other than the decorative art chapter of Spencer's books. For example, Spencer includes documentation of Estuarine Crocodile mythology, identification of this being's importance in Mardayin ceremony, and its presence in the sacred objects that are the focus of Mardayin dances (Spencer 1914:222, 224, 305–308). Estuarine Crocodile created numerous sites and this being is understood to be the 'leader' in Mardayin. Performance of Mardayin required many clans to congregate and Majumbu was likely to have been a key organiser whose Country is adjacent Oenpelli. Spencer notes the congregation of 'Kulunglutchi' or Kunwinjku as well as Kakadu (Gagadju) near Oenpelli for the jointly held performance. Harvey (1992:3) notes that Kunwinjku and Gagadju were already in close association, at least from 1870, and that Gagadju and Kunwinjku clans adjoin only 2km east of Oenpelli. One of Spencer's primary informants, and primary Traditional Owner of Oenpelli, Nipper Maragara, born around 1880, was identified by Spencer as 'Kakadu' although he also had a Kunwinjku mother of the Murwan clan of Fish Creek just to the east (Harvey 1992:3). Another artist, Paddy Compass Namadbara, said that he, and

his father, also came down from Iwaidja and Amurdak Country to the north to assist in this performance for Spencer (Goldhahn et al. 2021). The point is that Mardayin was and continues to be a major regional Arnhem Land ceremony where many clans from multiple language groups are necessary for performances to be considered spiritually effective in rejuvenating the participants and the world more broadly. Estuarine Crocodile is recognised as an extremely important creator across a wide region. X-ray imagery of Estuarine Crocodile is appropriate given its original creation of other important manifestations from parts of its body.

Majumbu's original rock painting can be conceived as a creative act that is formative of his association with this being at Djimuban. The bark painting is intended to have meaning for a local audience who would know the site and the associated ceremony, although this relationship is necessarily opaque for those who do not know it. The paintings can be conceived as social actions related to other kinds of activities that landowners perform to reproduce such links. For example, landowners are responsible for the formal introduction of visitors to the spirits of Country by calling to them in a special clan-based language referred to as *kundangwok* and the application of a landowner's sweat to the invitees so they will be recognised and unharmed by such spirits (Garde 2008). Having been appropriately introduced, visitors may also be invited to paint hand stencils or more elaborate works at some shelters. Visits to Aboriginal sites are thus controlled to protect visitors from the spiritual powers invested in the Country and the practice of formal introduction of visitors to sites continues today, as we have experienced first-hand many times ourselves. More public demonstrations of ownership are evidenced in ceremonial performances where landowners have the exclusive right to dance the activities of their original creators and wear the appropriate Ancestrally created body designs. From the dancer's perspective, they embody the Ancestor in wearing the design. The relative permanence of rock shelter paintings is appropriate to indicating the persisting aspect of such connections.

The Majumbu example leads us to understand that a first step to reinterpreting the importance of the Spencer/Cahill collection is to see the subject matter of the bark collection as relating to land-based religion. We are required to adopt interpretative models that engage with the complexity of art creation as part of social processes that form and control Ancestral affiliations and the dissemination of knowledge about Ancestral matters (Morphy 2009; see also Brady et al. 2021). Majumbu's

example also points to the way that the bark paintings can be inspired by historic acts. As Rumsey (1994) has shown, Aboriginal understandings of local history, as well as conceptions of Ancestral creation, are linked as inscriptive practices that employ 'features of landscape as the medium for the production and reproduction of meaning' (1994:116). We might appreciate how, over time, these distinctions can merge and how the actions of contemporary people negotiating changed circumstance, such as that brought about by colonisation, ultimately meld with the Ancestral order. The example presented in this paper points to a requirement to distinguish within the corpus of the Spencer/Cahill bark painting collection a special category of bark paintings that are explicit 'copies of rock paintings in rock shelters'; this category remains important in contemporary art made in the area to codify historic and Ancestral social connections and their expression in land (May 2023).

Summary and conclusions

The Spencer-Cahill bark painting collection is an outstanding and unique archive of art, history and Aboriginal culture. We are indebted to Baldwin Spencer for having the foresight to collect 50 paintings during his initial visit to Oenpelli in 1912 and later to commission over 100 more with the help of Paddy Cahill. It has been argued above that a Kulunglutji (Kunwinjku) man known both as Old Harry and Majumbu made at least eight of these bark paintings that we know of, six in the Melbourne Museum's Spencer-Cahill Collection, one in the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac collection and one that went missing in 1965. Old Harry/Majumbu also made recent rock paintings in western Arnhem Land, including a spectacular x-ray crocodile at the Djimuban rock art site that is almost identical to the crocodile bark painting in the Spencer-Cahill Collection. This adds to two bark paintings recently argued to have been made by Paddy Compass Namadbara (Goldhahn et al. 2021) and it is expected that other artists of bark paintings in the Spencer-Cahill Collection will also be identified in the future.

There was an early interest in Arnhem Land paintings on sheets of bark that were used to form hut-like shelters by visitors to Port Essington in the early to mid-1800s and later by Paul Foelshe and others visiting Arnhem Land in the late 1800s (Taçon and Davies 2004), with some collected for museums (e.g. Carrington 1890; Cox 1878). But it was the commissioning of bark paintings by Baldwin Spencer in 1912, and later through his intermediary, Paddy Cahill, that facilitated the



Figure 14. Gunbalanya community members below Majumbu's rock painting of a crocodile after re-finding the Djimuban rock shelter on 26 September 2022 (Priscilla Bardi, Merrill Namundja, Katie Nayingul, Lorraine Namarnyilk, Kenneth Mangiru, Ezaiah Kelly and Jarrod Nabalwad; photograph by P. Taçon).

widespread appreciation of an art movement which heretofore had existed on the walls of rock shelters and bark huts in western Arnhem Land, later resulting in bark paintings displayed in museums, art galleries, corporate offices and private residences throughout the world. We are now able to learn about some of the Aboriginal artists behind the Spencer-Cahill Collection, their families and their lives. Something that adds new life and significance to these early bark paintings, not only for interested people across the globe, as discussed above, but also for the artists' descendants, many of whom still live at Gunbalanya (Oenpelli) today. For instance, there was great joy for the seven Gunbalanya community members who accompanied us when we found the Djimuban rock shelter and Majumbu's crocodile rock painting (Figure 14), especially for two of his direct descendants: Merrill Namundja and Kenneth Mangiru. This is because being at the site provided them a direct connection to their ancestors, the early contact period that their ancestors lived through, and the local landscape that was their home. It brought back memories of times they interacted with Majumbu's sons, the ongoing land ownership rights of the Nabarlek area, being told stories of Ancestral Beings and landscape creation, as well as knowledge shared in ritual contexts that was important for survival and ensuring intangible

heritage was passed on to future generations. Thus, knowing the names and individuals behind the creation of rock paintings and museum objects, in this case rock paintings at Djimuban and other sites, along with Spencer-Cahill bark paintings, adds a whole new dimension to their significance by way of personal, familial, clan and land-based religious connections.

Religious connections to the land became much more important in western Arnhem Land with the mapping of Country 60 years after the Spencer-Cahill bark paintings were collected, associated with the development of land rights and confrontation of landowners with mining interests. Understanding of landowner rights to the Nabarlek area were central to these interactions and Majumbu's original rock painting was identified and published in this context (Edwards 1979). Research into the details of Aboriginal conceptions of totemic creation and spiritual identification with land as well as knowledge about the personal life histories of the movement of individuals within this religious landscape was a key aspect of affirming connections and rights to land.

Acknowledgements

We thank everyone at Injalak Arts and the broader Gunbalanya (Oenpelli) community for supporting this project and taking part in the community discussions.

Special thanks to Traditional Owners Julie Narndal Gumurdul, Yvonne Gumurdul, Adrian Gumurdul, Alfred Nayinggul, and Connie Nayinggul for their support and guidance. Priscilla Bardi, Ezaiah Kelly, Jarrod Nabalwad, Lorraine Namarnyilk, Merrill Namundja and Katie Nayinggul are thanked for helping us relocate the Djimuban rock shelter. Museums Victoria has generously supported our project with archival material and photographs from the Spencer-Cahill Collection, and we especially want to acknowledge the contribution of Melanie Raberts, Robert McWilliams, Nancy Ladas, Shannon Faulkhead and Mary Morris. We thank our fellow researchers on this project and our project partners Injalak Arts and Davidson's Arnhemland Safaris. The project is also sponsored by Rock Art Australia, and we thank them for their generous support.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research is a part of the project 'Art at a Crossroads: Aboriginal responses to contact in northern Australia' (2021–2023), which is funded by the Australian Research Council [SR200200062].

ORCID

Paul S. C. Taçon  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0280-4366>
 Luke Taylor  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5706-2056>
 Sally K. May  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2805-023X>
 Joakim Goldhahn  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4640-8784>
 Andrea Jalandoni  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4821-7183>

References

- Austin-Broos, D.J. 1999 Review article, Bringing Spencer and Gillen home. *Oceania* 69(3):209–216.
- Berndt, R.M. 1964 *Australian Aboriginal Art*. London: Collier-MacMillan Ltd.
- Berndt, R.M and C.H. Berndt 1970 *Man, Land and Myth in North Australia: The Gunwinggu People*. Sydney: Ure Smith.
- Brady, L.M., L. Taylor, S.K. May and P.S.C. Taçon 2021 Meaningful choices and relational networks: Analysing western Arnhem Land's Painted Hand rock art style using *chaîne opératoire*. *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 65:101396.
- Cahill, P. 1917 Letter to H.E. Carey, Chief Protector of Aborigines, Darwin, 30 June 1917. In 1918. *The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia. Northern Territory of Australia. Report of the administrator for the years 1915–16 and 1916–17*. Victoria: Government of the Commonwealth of Australia, Government Printer.
- Campbell, J. 1834 Geographic memoir of Melville Island and Port Essington on the Cobourg Peninsula, northern Australia, with some observations on the settlements which have been established on the north coast of New Holland. *Journal of the Royal Geographic Society of London* 4:129–81.
- Carrington, F. 1890 The rivers of the Northern Territory. *Proceedings of the Royal Geographic Society of Australia (South Australia Branch)* 2:56–76.
- Carroll, P.J. 1983 Aboriginal art from western Arnhem Land. In P. Loveday and P. Cooke (eds), *Aboriginal Arts and Crafts and the Market*, pp.44–48. Darwin: Australian National University, North Australia Research Unit.
- Clifford, J. 1988 *The Predicament of Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cole, K. 1975 *A History of Oenpelli*. Darwin: Nungalinga Publications.
- Cox, J.C. 1878 Drawings by Australian Aborigines. *Proceedings of the Linnean Society of New South Wales* 3(2):155–161.
- Edwards, R. 1979 *Australian Aboriginal Art. The Art of the Alligator Rivers Region, Northern Territory*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.
- Garde, M. 2008 Kun-dangwok: 'Clan-lects' and Ausbau in western Arnhem Land. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 191:141–169.
- Goldhahn, J., L. Taylor, P.S.C. Taçon, S.K. May and G. Maralngurra 2021 Paddy Compass Namadbara and Baldwin Spencer: An artist's recollection of the first commissioned Aboriginal bark paintings in Oenpelli, 1912. *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 2021(2):46–65.
- Goldhahn, J., G. Maralngurra, L. Taylor, P.S.C. Taçon and S.K. May 2022a Paddy Compass Namadbara: For the first time we can name an artist who created bark paintings in Arnhem Land in the 1910s. *The Conversation* 11 May 2022. <<https://theconversation.com/paddy-compass-namadbara-for-the-first-time-we-can-name-an-artist-who-created-bark-paintings-in-arnhem-land-in-the-1910s-180243>>
- Goldhahn, J., S.K. May, and P.S.C. Taçon 2022b Picturing Nayombolmi: The most prolific known rock art artist in the world. *Rock Art Research* 39(2):155–167.
- Gunn, R.G. 1988 Survey and Assessment of Rock Art Sites in the Kudjumarndi and Kukalak Areas, Western Arnhem Land. Unpublished report to the Northern Land Council, Darwin.
- Harvey, M. 1992 The Gaagudju People and their Language. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sydney, Sydney.
- Haskovec, I.P. and H. Sullivan 1989 Reflections and rejections of an Aboriginal artist. In H. Morphy (ed.), *Animals into Art*, pp.57–74. One World Archaeology 7. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Jones, P. 1988 Perceptions of Aboriginal art: A history. In P. Sutton (ed.), *Dreamings, the Art of Aboriginal Australia*, pp.143–179. Ringwood, Victoria: Viking.
- Kestevan, S. 1984 Linguistic considerations of land tenure in western Arnhem Land. In G.R. McKay and B.A. Summer (eds), *Further Applications of Linguistics to Australian Aboriginal Contexts*, pp.47–64. Occasional Papers No.8. Melbourne: Applied Linguistics Association of Australia.
- Lydon, J. 2016 *Photography, Humanitarianism, Empire*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Lydon, J. 2018 Hidden women of history: Elsie Masson, photographer, writer, intrepid traveller. *The Conversation*. Retrieved 30 December 2018 from <<https://theconversation.com/hidden-women-of-history>>

- elsie-masson-photographer-writer-intrepid-traveller-107808>.
- Masson, E.R. 1915 *An Untamed Territory. The Northern Territory of Australia*. London: MacMillan and Co.
- May, S.K. 2006 *Karrikadjurren: Creating Community with an Art Centre in Indigenous Australia*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Australian National University, Canberra.
- May, S.K. 2010 *Collecting Cultures. Myth, Politics, and Collaboration in the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press.
- May, S.K., J. Maralngurra, I.G. Johnston, J. Goldhahn, G. Lee, G. O'Loughlin, K. May, C. Nabobbob, M. Garde and P.S.C. Taçon 2019 'This is my father's painting': A first-hand account of the creation of the most famous rock art in Kakadu National Park. *Rock Art Research* 36(2):199–213.
- May, S.K., J. Huntley, M. Marshall, E. Miller, J. Hayward, A. Jalandoni, J. Goldhahn, I. Johnston, J. Lee, G. O'Loughlin, K. May, I. Domingo Sanz and P.S.C. Taçon 2020a New insights into the rock art of Anbangbang Gallery, Kakadu National Park. *Journal of Field Archaeology* 45(2):120–134.
- May, S.K., L. Rademaker, D. Nadjamerrek and J.N. Gumurdul 2020b *The Bible in Buffalo Country. Oenpelli Mission 1925–1931*. Canberra: ANU Press.
- May, S.K., J. Goldhahn, L. Rademaker, G. Badari and P.S.C. Taçon 2021a Quilp's horse: Rock art and artist life-biography in western Arnhem Land, Australia. *Rock Art Research* 38(2):211–221.
- May, S.K., P.S.C. Taçon, A. Jalandoni, J. Goldhahn, D. Wesley, T. Tsang and K. Mangiru 2021b The re-emergence of nganaparru (water buffalo) into western Arnhem Land life, landscape and rock art. *Antiquity* 95(383):1298–1314.
- May, S.K. 2023 *Karrikadjurren: Art, Community, and Identity in Western Arnhem Land*. London: Routledge.
- McKeown, F. 1989 Mahkani (Nabarlek) Western Arnhem Land: Site Survey of ELA 2508 (Including notes on ELA 2505). Unpublished report to the Northern Land Council, Darwin.
- Morphy, H. 2009 Art as a mode of action: Some problems with Gell's *Art and Agency*. *Journal of Material Culture* 14 (1):5–27.
- Mulvaney, D.J. 2004 *Paddy Cahill of Oenpelli*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Mulvaney, D.J. and J.H. Calaby. 1985 *'So Much that Is New': Baldwin Spencer, 1860-1929, a Biography*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Mulvaney, D.J., H. Morphy and A. Petch 1997 *'My Dear Spencer': The Letters of F.J. Gillen to Baldwin Spencer*. Melbourne: Hyland House.
- Munn, N.D. 1970 The transformation of subjects into objects in Walbiri and Pitjantjatjarra myth. In R. Berndt (ed.), *Australian Aboriginal Anthropology*, pp.178–207. Perth: University of Western Australia Press.
- Munn, N.D. 1973 *Walbiri Iconography*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Róheim, G. 1932 Psycho-analysis of primitive cultural types. *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 13: 1–233.
- Róheim, G. 1945 *The Eternal Ones of Dream*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Rumsey, A. 1994 The Dreaming, human agency and inscriptive practice. *Oceania* 65:116–130.
- Rumsey, A. 1999 Comment on Mulvaney et al. 1997 *My Dear Spencer* and Review of it in *Oceania* by Diane Austin-Broos. *Oceania* 70(2):177–178.
- Ryan, J. 1990 *Spirit in Land: Bark Paintings from Arnhem Land*. Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria.
- Spencer, W.B. 1914 *Native Tribes of the Northern Territory of Australia*. London: MacMillan and Co.
- Spencer, W.B. 1928 *Wanderings in Wild Australia*. Volume 2. London: MacMillan and Co.
- Stanner, W.E.H. 1963 *On Aboriginal Religion*. Oceania Monographs 11. Sydney: University of Sydney Press.
- Strehlow, C. 1907–1920 *Die Aranda-und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral Australien* (5 volumes). Frankfurt am Main: Joseph Baer and Company.
- Taçon, P.S.C. 1989 From Rainbow Snakes to 'X-ray' Fish: The Nature of the Recent Rock Painting Tradition of Western Arnhem Land, Australia. Unpublished PhD thesis, Australian National University, Canberra.
- Taçon, P.S.C. and S. Davies 2004 Transitional traditions: 'Port Essington' bark-paintings and the European discovery of Aboriginal aesthetics. *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 2004(2):72–86.
- Taçon, P.S.C., S.K. May, D. Wesley, A. Jalandoni, R. Tsang and K. Mangiru 2021 History disappearing: The rapid loss of Australia's contact period rock art with a case study from the Djarrng site of Arnhem Land, Northern Territory. *Journal of Field Archaeology* 46(2): 119–131.
- Taçon, P.S.C., S.K. May, J. Goldhahn, L. Taylor, L.M. Brady, A. Ressel, A. Jalandoni, D. Wesley and G. Maralngurra 2022 Extraordinary back-to-back human and animal figures in the art of western Arnhem Land, Australia: One of the world's largest assemblages. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 32(4):707–720.
- Taylor, L. 1996 *Seeing the Inside: Bark Painting in Western Arnhem Land*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, L. 2015 Categories of 'old' and 'new' in western Arnhem Land bark painting. In A. McGrath and M.A. Jebb (eds), *Long History, Deep Time: Deepening Histories of Place*, pp.101–117. Canberra: ANU Press.
- Taylor, L. 2019 Bodies revealed: X-ray Art in western Arnhem Land. In B. David and I. McNiven (eds), *Oxford Handbook of the Anthropology and Archaeology of Rock Art*, pp.695–716. Oxford: Oxford University Press.