

RESEARCH REPORTS

A Wardaman creation story by Bill Harney

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This paper is a collaboration between the writer and the storyteller. Since Bill Harney gave his perceptions on tape and video recordings, the language usage largely follows his telling of the story. Bill is the senior Aboriginal elder of the Wardaman people from west of Katherine in the Victoria River District of Australia's Northern Territory. He gives his creation story to provide his people with an understanding of the images that were put on the rock by the ancestors. The images of Wardaman rock-art are generally recognised as 'lightning figures' after the wide distribution of a video, *The land of the lightning brothers* (Roberts 1987), and through Walsh (1988) as well as Bill Harney's tours to some Wardaman sites with images of two striped figures.

This account provides further insight into Wardaman culture and its formation by the ancestors. The Dreaming Ancestors created a large part of the rock-art we see today and Wardaman call these paintings *buwarija*. Dreaming Ancestors put all the laws, ceremonies and stories in place to be handed down from generation to generation. Bill tells about Wardaman understanding of the natural laws of the earth, seasonal changes, floods, fires, drought, cyclones and their connection with the creation period. He explains through his creation story how the depictions relate to all these things that the ancestors created:

The shadow of all the lightning people went into the rock and that's where they all are today. They changed from that shadow and some became different birds, others became the lizards and the humans and all this you see here in the rock-paintings. The creation of this country is what they have been telling in the story and the song.

We in the Western world know that if there is no written language, metaphors are used in orally transmitted stories to reflect the ideas and concepts of the people; as well, people make great use of visual imagery.

The story of creation is told on this occasion at Nardaya, a site consisting of a complex of large boulders surrounded by a low-lying ridge of broken sandstone. In five discrete shelters there are paintings and carvings. Bill has told the writer the same story at many different rock-art sites, which he has also visited

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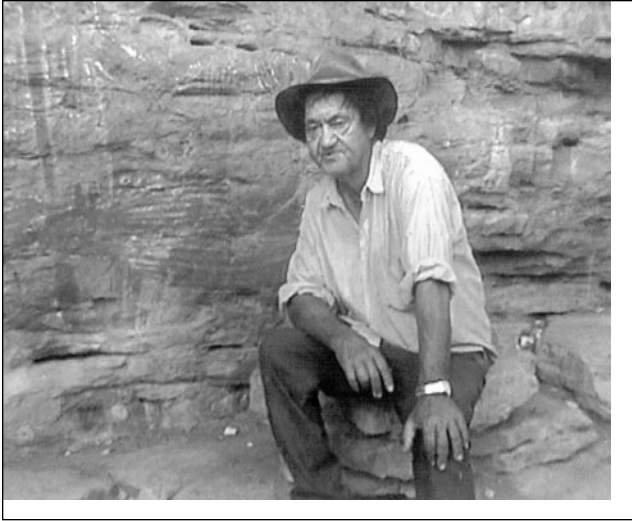


Figure 1
Bill Harney telling his creation story

with tourists as well as with family. The creation story is not specific to a particular Wardaman site but rather parts of it are represented at various landscape places where animals and plants received their shapes and markings. Encoded within the shapes and markings of ancestral animals and plants is the sanctioning of the laws and customs.

The creation story has many parts to it and it is linked to the Dreaming tracks and songlines of that country. A Dreaming track can be identified through physical places in the landscape or it may be a conceptual track that the ancestors made for those coming after to follow. Bill explains in a strange language of metaphor and great detail this story that I have heard many times over a period of eight years. My observations are in brackets or separated from Bill's text, which I have transcribed from tapes and videos. I have made no attempt to alter Bill's sequence so that explanation of natural phenomena is interwoven with events of social relations or social structure:

Before, the little boy came to split the dog's ear, then the lightning people walked around in the wet mud and left their footprints, but now they are in the rock. See those large emu or bird tracks and kangaroo tracks? They were put on the vertical wall when the mud hardened. When the dog sang out, that's the time when everything changed and the shadow of all the lightning people went in to the rock, and that's where they remain today. Later the shadows changed to become different birds, animals, lizards and humans. All these you see here in the rock-paintings, and they were the

creator of this country as told in the stories and the songs. All this was put together and divided: totems for different people, all the different skinships, names of the people and who they can marry, and all those who created the law are here in the rock—the *marbun*, the engravings with all different meanings. It was all part of the registration.

First in this country there was no tree, just a flat land. Here was under water, a sea was made by old Rainbow. [The imagery of Rainbow is in the form of a snake, at times depicted with front legs and horns or ears.] The Rainbow was sitting round there and later Dungdung, the Frog lady, came out from the side of the earth that she had made herself. Then she went across and made up with Rainbow and they had many children together. They had a lot of children by the water system. Then later Dungdung walked out of the water inland and dried herself.

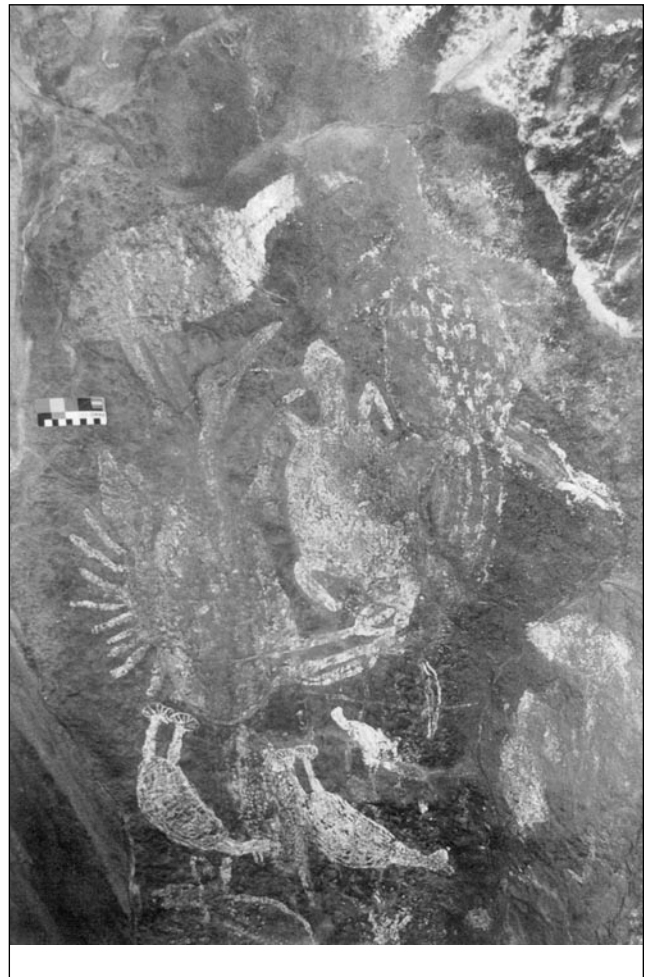


Figure 2
The animals painted at the shelter

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Figure 3
Emu, kangaroo and human footprints left in wet mud

Nardai saw her and came down [from the sky] beside her and Dungdung asked, 'Where you come from?' He replied, 'I come from on top'; and then he asked her, 'Where you come from?' and she replied, 'I come from inside of the earth'.

'We call that from *Gunjong* from *Buwaraja*', explained Bill, and continued:

Then Dungdung made it up with Nardai and she had two husbands and they had many children who became all lightning people – the ones that struck the land. First, all the lightning people were 'moodoo' meaning everyone was silent, then later they became ones with the mouth so they could talk. When they talked that's the time when they tell the stories about this place. They put all the creation stories and songs together. Then they invented all these different tools showing how to go about it and how to put them together.

Rainbow heard everyone making a lot of noise. He stood right up and looked and came over to Dungdung. 'Why you doing this—having everyone inland?' asked Rainbow, adding, 'I told you to put everyone under water'.

'No', said Dungdung, 'we got to have two separate lots. One lot under the water and one lot inland that



Figure 4
Painting of ancestor without mouth

will be related to "skinship" and to our totems. Then all brothers, cousins, aunts, uncles know the songs that link up with them [and see how] it's related.'

Rainbow replied, 'That's why I put the songs together'. He was angry with Dungdung and went back to the sea and made this great big spiritual song and made the water rise up. Water came right up through this country and flooded the whole world.



Figure 5
Painting of ancestor with mouth

Bill explained that the rising water is called *wombulwombul* and a song was made for its creation. Bill sang:

Jalinji, jalinji...[everything softens like clay, everything muddy]. All these lightnings moved and walked from the low country and based themselves on top of the iron mountain. Old Nardai came down and helped the children move to the high country. He had sung¹ that mountain to go up and today we call it 'Bunangaiya'.

Then Willy Wagtail came along with another song for the earth to go up more so the lightnings could live there. He also invented the spear point at the same time. He went to Nardai and talked about putting all the spear points together to spear Rainbow and let all the water out [to stop the land flooding]. Nardai sang the spear points and rubbed them. It's called '*verima*'.

When Nardai sang the first spear and threw it at old Rainbow it hit him and cut him in half. That frightened old Rainbow so he sang more and the water went higher. Water was still coming up when Nardai threw the second spear and the lightnings could not stop the water from rising.

There were another two sitting down watching the lightnings; they were as humans then, the Grey Falcon and the White Flying Falcon who watched over the laws in that country.²

Willy Wagtail came over and said, 'Here are two spear points, maybe you can be more accurate and stop Rainbow from flooding the land'. The Grey Falcon had the spear point and sang it, then he's rubbing the mud again and he spits on the end of it (we call that *gungoo*). The Grey Falcon made the spear look like a feather and when he threw this spear it hit old Rainbow on the back of the neck and cut his head right off. Then Rainbow's head fell down and the water poured out of the tail end going back to the sea level where Rainbow had made his spiritual song. Then the eyeball of the Rainbow came out in a rock-hole and today that place is known as 'Rainbow Eye'.³

According to Bill, Nardai brought down all these lightning beings and animals from the sky:

Then, all of them were looking for food in the mud and at the same time doing all their ceremonies. A lot of them were perished now with no water. They asked old Nardai to bring water to drink. So he dug a hole in the ground and sang it. Then the two big lightning lawmakers of this country [painted today at the lightning brother site on Delamere Station] picked up this water and took it across the country. They put a big signal [of sheet lightning] in the air to let everyone

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know there was enough water for everyone to drink. But some of them [other lightning beings] would not accept this water saying it might be dirty ceremonial water with ochre in it. As the ochres have the different meanings of the laws and these two lightning brothers, Yagjagbulla and Jabirinji, are the lawmakers; they stopped the other lightnings from coming closer to them and said that only they would be responsible for bringing the water to this country.

Today, we see these two lightning brothers depicted at Delamere Station in their full ceremonial headdress and all painted up in red and white striped ochre. There is also a story about a fight that these two brothers (Yagjagbulla and Jabirinji) had over a woman, the wife of Jaberinji. This is well documented by Arndt (1962), Merlan (1989) and Flood et al. (1992) and will not form part of this discussion, as that story is not part of the original creation story. There is also a similar painting of two lightning figures known as *Gornbun* or Hawk men, which is painted in a neighbouring clan country of Mumendadguni.

However, the story of the creation dogs and the kangaroos, which we see repeatedly depicted across Wardaman country and further to the west in Ngariman country and Yarralin country to the south-west, was also spoken about by Bill Harney. This story was always given in conjunction with the creation story that described the seasonal floods and dry periods because the creation dog carried the bag of songs that contain the spiritual way, knowledge of land and ceremonies for the human social world.

Bill continued his story, moving it from the natural physical cosmos to that of social structure and social relations. Figure 6 shows the dog chasing the kangaroo, and the Mimi lady (Maralabena) on the tail.

There was a huge number of creation dogs [*mudburrongo*] as well in this country. They were all part of the lightnings but they were a separate mob with the 'yimerrug' [the savage one]. They were an angry mob and the other lightnings did not want them anyway. The *mudburrongo* came across to chase these humans



Figure 6
The Maralabena lady on the back of the kangaroo

away. They started making footprints like a kangaroo and called themselves the kangaroo lightnings. So the grey kangaroo was chased right across the desert in the western side through the basin into the salt water. With our songline, the story and the song were linked together and with their songline the creation dog was chasing the human kangaroo. All these little lightning people saw the human kangaroo coming and the creation dog behind, chasing him, and they both left many footprints. The grey kangaroo thought, 'I might head straight for these little lightning beings and they will scare the dog away'.

Then the kangaroo saw this hole in the iron mountain and jumped right through. As the Kangaroo hit the iron mountain there was another hole where the spiritual Mimi, lightning lady, was asleep and she heard him and got up to see what was happening. She saw many dogs chasing behind the kangaroo. Then at the same time as the kangaroo put his eye over the high mountain the old lady Mimi, Maralabena, got hold of the kangaroo's tail and jumped on it, like a piggy on his back.

At the same time Willy Wagtail and Diver Duck, Duchez, were sitting down making many spear points just in case old Rainbow let the water back in to the country. While they were there this other kangaroo went flat out right past them and frightened old Willy Wagtail and Diver Duck. They thought the earth was falling down and they ran off to stop it. They got up — headed across to stop the earth on the high mountain from falling down.

Then Willy Wagtail saw this old Mimi lady riding on the tail of the kangaroo. He said to Diver Duck, 'You must race up there quick and put a song in that earth'. So Willy Wagtail took some mud and sang it and made it strong and he raced up and put a stop on the earth. Then he said, 'We'll put this there so that this story can be seen from here for generation to generation'.

The little boy sitting up on top of the high mountain was a bird; today he's called 'Jerry Jeroma'. He was watching all this and jumped off to pick up the dog's trail. At the same time the Blackheaded Python [Walijabi] went straight past the little boy and headed to old lightning. He said to old lightning, 'When you go to sing that rain the cloud will go up in the air and the water will come down from the top and disappear like the rest of the water. How we going to stop the water from getting away?' So the lightning asked the Blackheaded Python if he had a song. 'Yes, I've got a song that old Dungdung, my old lady, taught me,' said the Blackheaded Python. So he went ahead and sang it

with the water python. They sang with a creation tune called *milirri* and another one called *gungan*.

Bill explained:

That's the tune that makes many gorges in the country, cuts the rivers, makes many channels. The rivers are bare now and need to be filled. So lightning said, 'I'll go ahead now and sing', and he dug a hole in the earth. Then just before he was about to sing the grasshopper came along and said to old lightning, 'When you sing that rain the cloud will go up on top to one spot. How you going to move that cloud?' So lightning said to grasshopper, 'You got a song to move that cloud?'

'Yes I've got a big whirly wind song we'll both sing together so that whatever froth came out of his mouth formed into big hail'. Then lightning kept on singing and started the smoke up then the grasshopper started singing at the same time and the clouds started to build up and pick up the big whirly wind [which] spread it all over the country. The lightning hit the cloud with the boomerang and made it go BANG. The rain came down and filled the country with water.

The grasshopper is Bill's clan-country totem and Bill has detailed knowledge of its ancestral activity. Therefore the grasshopper plays an important role in the creation story when a Yubulyawun clan person tells it. Another Wardaman person might deliver the creation story with different emphasis and detail of different animals such as the Blue Tongued Lizard or the Little Bat.

Now Bill resumed the main theme:

Then the Blackheaded Python and all the lightnings were calling out to the little boy that he might wake up the dog laying down on top of the high mountain. At first the little boy thought the dog was dead because the dog never moved. The little boy saw all these stone knives thrown by lightning people when they tried to kill that dog. He picked up one of these stone knives and said if I go down and hit that dog he might wake up. He went right up to the dog and when he split the dog's ear what happened in this country was that all the trees stood up and the soft lime mountain changed to become rock. All of a sudden everything was tipped over. All the lightning people were painted up walking around, but when the dog howled, then the people went into the wall of the rock and that's where they stayed there. We call that '*Walaburinga*'. Today we call those little lightnings '*yarrandi*' and they have two leaders, one Jabiringi and the other Yagjagbulla. Jabiringi doesn't strike any trees he carries the big rain that comes from the whirly wind made by the

grasshopper. Today we call it the cyclone. Yagjagbulla is the one who takes the lead; he strikes the ground, lights the grass and takes the trees.

Discussion

Bill Harney's creation story needs to be seen and understood as one aspect of the Aboriginal cosmos. It is linked with sacred places, sacred songs and sacred ceremonies such as the stone knife from the circumcision ceremony, which must be obscured from those who are not fully initiated. So while the listener becomes aware of specific themes and events, which are part of the iconography as well as other landscape sites that also contain part of the stories and allegories, he/she is not delivered the full intrinsic meaning of these events.

There are parallel stories in other regions of Australia. For example, the Bunuba people of the eastern Kimberley tell a story of the Melatji Law Dogs and how they travelled to the Napier and King Leopold Ranges and finally painted themselves at a place called Barralumma after they had touched all the major water sources to link with the water snake (Nyoongah 1994). In the McPherson Range on the south-eastern border of Queensland, two dogs chased a kangaroo to a place called Ilbogon where they jumped into a lagoon and were caught in a net and taken away to be eaten but these people vanished after their feast. The two dogs' bones were taken to the top of a waterfall and there remain as stones (Reed 1997). The giant devil dog is depicted with stripes across its back and in the manner reminiscent of a Thylacine. Dick Roughsey, in *The giant devil dingo* (1973), gives the story of Woodbarl, the white cloud, who divided the body of the giant dog, taking the kidneys, the head and all the bones to the top of a mountain. In Wardaman country, the creation dog, which carried the stone knife for the circumcision ceremony, is depicted in many different sizes and at most site complexes throughout their country.

The creation myth is there to connect the physical world of rain, storm, flood, sky and animals with the land when the animals and plants receive their shapes and markings. At the same time, the creation story shows the sacred world of law and punishment—killing off Rainbow, establishing the lawmakers of the land who can control the sky (Yagjagbulla and Jabiringi) as well as the human world of family relationship—the dogs and kangaroos are different mobs that come into this country. Then rules of



Figure 7
The creation dog, *Mudburrongo*

behaviour take shape as everything immobilises and remains constant. The pathways are connected by the animals that are the metaphors for different groups of people, both within the same language group and those beyond. Encoded within the shapes and markings of ancestral animals and plants are the plans of the sanctioning of the laws and customs.

The creation story provides the cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth, on the one hand, and, on the other, the foundation of the Dreaming philosophy where natural elements are linked to events that shaped the world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

This article derives from a presentation made to Session K: 'Indigenous Perceptions by the Users and Makers of Rock Art' at the AURA2000 Congress in Alice Springs.

1. To 'sing something into existence' is a common Aboriginal concept passed down from ancestors with supernatural powers. The song is often in the form of a chant and is associated with a material object such as a quartz stone, a bone, or a piece of hair.
2. These two birds are depicted in one of the shelters in Bunangaiya country. They are the watchmen over the laws.
3. Rainbow made the spiritual song at Fossil Head near the mouth of the Fitzmaurice River, Bonaparte Gulf in Murrinh-patha country. Today, a big sandbar is at the junction of the Katherine, Flora and Daly Rivers and the Rainbow Eye is just beyond on the Flora River.

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Julie Drew completed an MPhil. in Prehistoric and Historical Archaeology at the University of Sydney (Drew 2001), and was a member of the organising committee for the AURA2000 Congress in Alice Springs for which she convened the session on 'Indigenous Perceptions by the Users and Makers of Rock Art'. She continues to work with the Wardaman Aboriginal Corporation and Community to document women's business and history.

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Bill Harney (born c. 1933) has an encyclopaedic mind and a wealth of information that he will share with those who have gained the right to receive that knowledge. Bill managed to avoid removal from his homelands during the 1940s and 1950s when several Wardaman children were taken away by government order. Bill worked as a stockman on Vestey stations from the age of 12 years. His education has always been a bush one, although he lived in the township of Katherine for 20 years from 1974. He established a business as a tour operator, artist and supplier of didjeridus, all of which helped to support his extended family of some 60 dependants. He won land rights for his people so that in 1999 they returned to the cattle station at 'Menngen', formerly Innesvale Station. Today, Wardaman Aboriginal Corporation, with Bill Harney as the chairman, runs this cattle station and business.

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