Port Keats painting: Revolution and continuity

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Abstract: The role of the poet and collector of ‘mythologies’, Roland Robinson, in prompting the production of commercial bark-painting at Port Keats (Wadeye), appears to have been accepted uncritically — though not usually acknowledged — by collectors and curators. Here we attempt to trace the history of painting in the Daly–Fitzmaurice region to contextualise Robinson’s contribution, and to evaluate it from both the perspective of available literature and of accounts of contemporary painters and Traditional Owners in the Port Keats area. It is possible that the intervention that Robinson might have considered revolutionary was more likely a continuation of previously well-established cultural practice, the commercial development of which was both an Indigenous ‘adjustment’ to changing socio-cultural circumstances, and a quiet statement of maintenance of identity by strong individuals adapting and attempting to continue their cultural traditions.

‘The custom of painting on sheets of bark... is very old’, wrote Groger-Wurm (1973:201), and was widely practised throughout Australia. Caruana (1989:10), writing as editor of the scholarly Windows on the Dreaming, noted that the earliest known examples of paintings on bark dated from the early nineteenth century, were made inside shelters or specifically for use in rituals, and were abandoned or destroyed after use. The Sydney International Exhibition of 1879–80 was the venue of the first recorded public exhibitions of bark-paintings, and research collections in public institutions date from those made in the Port Essington area in the 1870s (Taylor 1996:16–17; Taçon and Davies 2004). Large collections have been made by expeditions such as the 1948 American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land, by individual researchers (including Baldwin Spencer, Karel Kupka1 and Groger-Wurm) for various organisations and by many individual collectors.

Port Keats bark-paintings in collections and exhibitions

The Daly–Fitzmaurice Rivers region seldom has been central to discussions of Indigenous Australian painting. Apart from the pioneering work of Stanner (1960), the rock-markings of the area only recently have been a subject of research (Crocombe et al. 2002; Ward et al. 2004); there is almost nothing on body-painting, and the only references to markings in sand appear to be those that relate to the taunting of the Mounted Police by the fugitive Nemarluk.2 Mention contempo-
Port Keats painting and its recent history. Other than for personal study, no copying or sharing is allowed.

Port Keats painters and paintings

Many Port Keats men took up painting on bark in the 1950s and 1960s. Those to become well known were Nym Bandak, Charlie Brinnen, Djinu Tjimari, Indji, Charlie Roche Nginbe (all Murrinhpatha speakers), Charlie Mardigan, Wilfred Mardigan, and Pundaminni (Marrinngarr). Notable examples of their work are held by national and other galleries and museums in Australia, Europe and North America.

Famously, in 1958, when the priest heading the Port Keats Catholic Mission, Richard Docherty, and anthropologist WEH Stanner were pouring over maps, Bandak (Dimininh clan) said that he had maps also (Barber 2000a). He proceeded to paint for his friend Stanner a series of striking works in ochre on Masonite hardboard cut-offs obtained from nearby building sites that illustrated (and demonstrated his claim to) his clan Country.

These paintings are cultural narratives, populated with motifs and symbols that only the initiated could decipher fully. For Bandak they appear to have been a medium to teach Stanner about his culture. The Masonite provided a surface significantly larger than those available from the eucalyptus bark obtainable in the area, and Bandak was able to develop more complex stories and stronger imagery.6 Examples of Bandak’s works on Masonite are held in private collections and by the National Gallery of Australia, AIATSIS, The Australian National University, and in France.

Not only was the collaboration between Bandak and Stanner one that left a unique legacy of representation of significant features of Murrinhpatha social and religious life, but Bandak was one of the last generation to have observed the introduction of the new rituals associated with the cult of the Old Woman (Ponh) (Stanner 1979:61, 1989:4ff.). He and his contemporaries were uniquely positioned to reproduce on bark the symbols of both the earlier Kunmangkurr mythology and Ponh cult, and may have done so in order to prolong their involvements, to pass on knowledge to a younger generation, and quietly to protest the Mission’s influence, at the same time as producing work for sale. Similar continuity of communication of symbolism through bark-painting has been recorded elsewhere in northern Australia, by, for example, Morphy (1991, 2008);7 his description of an adjustment movement on Elcho Island as a means by which Indigenous knowledge-holders attempted to explain their culture to outsiders is apposite also (Morphy 1991:19ff). On works made for sale to outsiders, Taylor (1989:25), in describing the representation of Dreaming figures and of ancestor beings by Kuninjkku painters, stressed their importance in transfer of knowledge between generations: ‘Bark painting is a vitally important way in which artists help to reproduce the ancestrally-created world.’

Genres of Port Keats paintings

The largest of the works on board painted by Bandak and Charlie Brinnen were for installation in the second church at Port Keats between late 1958 and 1961;8 after the third church was built in 1979 (Thomson 1988:60), some of these panels were salvaged and hung in the council office;
most are now incorporated into the Kanamek-Yile Ngala Museum (Figure 1). Some of the large panels painted by Leo Melpi and others in the current church (Figure 2) tell of the founding of the mission (T Ward 1983).

Bandak and his contemporaries painted many works on bark. They are of a different genre to Bandak’s larger works on Masonite. The imagery is more constrained due to the available surface but the style is also different. The curvilinear forms and symbols of Bandak’s ‘maps of Country’ were replaced by both geometric and more clearly figurative representations. The geometric designs reveal — and conceal — religious knowledge of both the suite of creator ancestors such as Kunmangkurr and Tjinimin, and the rites of the Pohn cult. Their typical motifs share their religious inspiration with representations in other media, including incised and painted stones, painted boards and bull-roarers, designs which were reproduced on bark-paintings for sale. The motifs used in the more-figurative works appear to be more typically related to representation of the creator ancestors (Figure 3).

Later generations of painters have experimented with exoteric motifs: there are rarrk-like backgrounds on which sit ‘fishes’ or ‘birds’ that might not represent other than fishes or birds; there are motifs that mimic the X-ray styles of Arnhem Land. West (2000:726) described Wadeye paintings as having become ‘...more decorative over the years, with a self-conscious realism apparent in the figurative and landscape compositions’. Many later paintings are entirely figurative in naïve styles, a genre that might be thought of as also ‘pictorial’ in its presentation of historical accounts (Figure 4) and secular scenes (in the sense of the picturesque stimulating admiration of local fauna or totems), including interactions between hunter and hunted and among warriors.

**Commercialisation and role of Port Keats Mission**

Port Keats painters had commercially successful exhibitions in State capitals in 1961, 1962 and subsequently. In 1961 a small group flew to Sydney, where they painted — in the window of the Qantas shop-front — barks for an exhibition there. Bandak’s fame as a painter was reflected in articles in the popular press: Willey (1962:6)
described him as ‘a very old man...leader of a flourishing colony of painters’, and reported that work by ‘masters’ such as Punduk ...’ could ‘bring up to 170 guineas’. Port Keats bark-paintings had become collectable by the mid-1960s. At ‘Darwin’s Aboriginal Museum’ Spence (1964:39) delighted in showing the ‘purely abstract’ Port Keats barks. Other collectors, especially Americans, were buying.

The mission encouraged painting groups. Preparation of barks and painting was done by groups of men seated in an area near the current presbytery (Figure 5). The mission promoted painting as an avenue through which men could access Western goods; sales also supported the functioning of the mission. Works were held in (and sold from) a storehouse that had been erected to contain supplies and trade goods near the presbytery (Figure 6). Paintings were exchanged for tobacco and other goods and, later, for cash. From here they were sold to visitors and in Darwin. From the 1960s, tourists flew into Port Keats on regular flights that provided a ‘milk-run’ to pastoral stations and communities between Darwin and Broome, and were encouraged to purchase barks and handicrafts.

By the late 1980s many of the original Port Keats painters who had sat with Bandak had died or were no longer painting. The Wadeye community had been established under a reformist federal government. The settlement, now with a population of more than one thousand, was much less remote from mainstream Australia: with the introduction of various government benefits, residents no longer worked the garden and other tasks, and self-sufficiency was replaced by dependence on welfare payments and ‘The Club’. The group-painting activities that were particularly strong in the 1960s became less frequent.
By 1993, with the leadership of adult education personnel at Wadeye, an artist’s co-operative had been formed, encouraging a renaissance of ‘art and craft’, and promoting sales in State capitals (Linkson and Nilco 1994). Painters were well served: In March 1995 works were offered by the Hogarth Galleries in Sydney at prices ranging from $250 to $3000 (Hogarth 1993). In 1994 a group of eight painters13 accompanied exhibitions of their works held in the San Francisco–Berkeley area (Martin 1994). Subsequently, in September 1998, the Murrinhpatha Nimmipa Store established the Dirrmu Ngakumarl (Totem’s Gallery, Figure 7) and the Wadeye Art and Crafts shop in Darwin.14 Paintings of a mural scale adorn the Council and other major building in Wadeye (Figure 8).

**History of Port Keats bark-painting**

The history of the development of bark-painting and its various influences appears poorly known. McCarthy (1965:9), in his survey of a nationwide exhibition arranged for a Commonwealth Arts Festival, wrote that Port Keats bark-painting had ‘began there within the past ten years’. Karel Kupka (1965:134, 138–9), the Czech ethnographer and painter15 who had visited Port Keats in 1960 and commissioned from Bandak two paintings on Masonite similar to those made for Stanner,16 thought that it had begun or re-established in 1954.17 The American collector, Ruhe (1966:28), who had made several visits to Australia, repeated that bark-painting began at Port Keats in 1960 and commissioned from Bandak two paintings on Masonite similar to those made for Stanner,16 thought that it had begun or re-established in 1954.17 The American collector, Ruhe (1966:28), who had made several visits to Australia, repeated that bark-painting began at Port Keats only in the recent past, a view shared by most subsequent commentators: Groger-Wurm (1973:203) noted that ‘commercial demand’ had prompted others outside the acknowledged centres to take up bark-painting, and Caruana (1987) commented that ‘bark painting is a recent introduction and is largely the result of missionary intervention’, and (1993:93): ‘In the 1950s, bark painting was introduced through the agency of the mission at Wadeye...at a time when bark paintings...were in demand’. The compiler of the notes for a Flinders University Art Museum exhibition including works from Port Keats followed Groger-Wurm and Caruana (as in other matters) in writing that ‘bark painting is a recent introduction’ (Anon. 1991:11). Brandl (1989:132–3) appeared less definite about whether Port Keats

‘painters used bark sheets as a surface before the mid-twentieth century’, and Michael O’Ferrall (1990:19) wrote, ‘Paintings on bark emerged commercially in the 1950s’.

While Martin (1994) considered that material held by an Oakland museum provided ‘...clear evidence that painting of totemic animals on wood was being done in this isolated region before the time of Punduk and others encouraged by WEH Stanner in the 1950s, and even before the beginnings of the Port Keats mission in 1935’, this possibility was not recognised by the compilers of a Bloomfield Galleries catalogue (Purcell 1998): ‘Bark painting from [Port Keats] is apparently a recent innovation, probably no older than 40 to 50 years.’ The possibility was not recognised by Jenkins and Lane (2000a:7) either: ‘Bark painting
was introduced to the area in the 1950s, following the commercial success of this portable collectable art from nearby Arnhem Land.’ In their informative essay, West and Barber (2007) concluded, somewhat uncritically with reference to the 1994 article by Martin, that, ‘As far as is known, the first bark-paintings were made for sale during the wartime period [1942–45] and, by the late 1940s were marketed through the mission shop.’

In his thesis — the primary focus of which is the works of Bandak collected by Stanner — Wilson (2000:84 and fn4) remarked on the antiquity of bark-painting in the Daly–Fitzmaurice region: ‘bark paintings...were produced for commercial purposes in the early 1940s, 1950s and 1960s’ and ‘paintings may have been produced in the 1940s and perhaps earlier...’. In support of this view, Wilson referenced several sources: first, ‘...two works in the Kluge-Ruhe collection...may have been produced before World War II’ (2000:21); second, the painted artefacts identified in the Oakland Museum collections (2000:40,46); third, the similarity of representations in rock-markings with the designs painted onto barks (2000:47–52, 91); fourth, ‘Fenton reported of an exhibition of art and artefacts arranged for the Murrinh-Patha during World War II’ (Wilson 2000:84); and, fifth, a mission worker, Sister Emmanuel, was reported to have written to Margie West (at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory) that she remembered having purchased a bark-painting after she had returned to Port Keats after the Second World War (2000:84, fn4).

**Figure 4:** Example of ‘pictorial’ painting at Port Keats: painted by Leo Melpi 1990s Ochre on canvas board 553 x 708 mm (c.f. Linkson and Nilco 1994) Kanamkek-Yile Ngala Museum (photograph: M Crocombe (131C92))
‘All these elements’, Wilson (2000:52) thought, ‘tend to confirm that the Murrinhpatha held a painting tradition dating back a long time, possibly thousands of years’. This conclusion was reified in later sections: ‘...the subject matter of paintings of the 1940s, 1950s’ (2000:60, cf. 84, 91); ‘...evidence of the use of geometric designs possibly from the 1920s’ (2000:94); ‘The 1940s, 1950s and 1960s was a period of cultural renaissance for the Murrinh-Patha with the flowering of the 1930s warriors into modern day artists’ (2000:98).

Most commentators, despite the views of Martin and Wilson, appear to have accepted, uncritically and with little reference to other accounts, that bark-painting in the Daly–Fitzmaurice region is a recent introduction, albeit one with a wealth of imagery from other media available to translate to bark. There is an important description of bark-painting at Port Keats that bears directly on this matter, that by the Sydney poet and greenkeeper’s assistant, Roland Robinson.

**Roland Robinson in Port Keats in 1954**

In 1954, Robinson, a recipient of a Commonwealth Literary Fund fellowship — provided by Menzies, he wrote, despite his recently being published by associates of Australian communists — set out

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*Figure 5: Nym Bandak painting geometric motif on bark at Port Keats Mission, 1950s (photograph: Kanamkew Yile Ngala Museum archive)*

*Figure 6: Port Keats Mission store, mid-1940s (photograph: Douglas R Finlayson, RAAF, courtesy AIATSIS (AIAT N663612))*
on a newly purchased motorcycle with a swag, three foolscap notebooks, and a pen called ‘Pero’, to record mythologies of Indigenous peoples of northern Australia. Robinson had worked with the Civil Construction Corps in the Top End during the Second World War and as a labourer in the Centre, so he was not entirely naive about his undertaking (Robinson 1973). Importantly, he had shared yarning time with Aboriginal persons on the south coast of New South Wales — notably Percy Mumbulla (Robinson 1976:ch. 4). He had some unrealistic expectations of being treated fairly by the protectors of Indigenous interests in the Northern Territory, but his perseverance and mates overcame those problems, and his personable approach and determined egalitarianism won him the confidence of the many Indigenous Australians who collaborated with him; the results were substantial in terms of the ‘myths’ sought and, perhaps, the history of bark-painting.

After calling at the Lutheran mission settlement at Hermannsburg, the government settlements at Areyonga and Haast’s Bluff, Robinson went to Roper River and on to Darwin, from where he flew to the Methodist settlement at Milingimbi; here he observed barks being prepared, painted and traded (Robinson 1976:142–7). Back in Darwin, Robinson met with Bishop O’Loughlin from whom he obtained ‘permission to visit, and stay at the Catholic Mission and Settlement at Port Keats’ (Robinson 1976:168).

**Port Keats in mid-1950s**

By 1954, the year of Roland Robinson’s visit, the Catholic mission at Port Keats was well-founded with a substantial population — more than one thousand, Stanner reported. It was largely self-supporting with extensive gardens, a powerhouse, cattle and various workshops (Stanner 1973; Thomson 1988; Chapman 2006). Most members of six language groups and 23 clans from the Daly–Fitzmaurice region had congregated there; a small non-Indigenous population included priests, brothers, nuns, teachers and a continual cycle of lay workers from various parts of Australia. Robinson and his companion ‘…travelled on the large, comfortable, Catholic Mission boat to Port Keats’, where they were given the use of ‘a comfortable little cottage’ and ‘treated with kindness and generosity’ by the mission staff, who, wrote Robinson (1976:169–70), ‘did all they could to help me in the work I came to do’; Richard Docherty MSC was in charge of the mission:

He was a big, well built, hard working, forthright man who had founded the Mission some thirty years before. In his rough, forthright way, he was a dedicated man. He came to the point with me at once. ‘You had better get all the pagan material you can from the Aboriginals while you are here,’ he told me, ‘because I intend to stamp it right out.’
Docherty told Robinson how he had tried to make the mission self-supporting, and how it was necessary that the residents were able to produce commodities that they could trade for Western goods and services that they needed.

Through no intentional planning on my part, I was able to help the Mission in this last matter. And, strangely, my help came from promoting the very ‘pagan’ material which Father Doughterty [sic] was so intent on stamping out.

**Robinson introduces bark-painting**

Robinson worked with several Murrinhpatha men including Djinu Tjimari (‘Kianoo Tjeemairee’), who became his main informant, and others, including Nym Bandak, who were to become renowned painters. He was surprised to learn that the Port Keats mob did not paint on bark and, unlike the Arnhem Land communities that he had visited, were not actively engaged in commercial painting.

When I had found my informants among the Murinbata men and had settled down to transcribing their traditions, I asked them, as I had done previously on the Roper River and at Milingimbi, if they would make paintings for me which belonged to the traditions. I had a book to make from the material I was gathering and needed paintings to illustrate and supplement the book.

When I asked the Murinbata men about paintings, whether on bark or sheets of cardboard in different colours I had brought with me, they did not understand me. They told me that they had never made bark paintings. ‘But,’ I told them, ‘you must have cave paintings. When you make dances and rituals, you must paint your bodies in your ‘Ngakuma’ (totems).’ The Murinbata men told me, ‘Yes, we do have, and make these paintings’. ‘Well,’ I told them, ‘what I want you to do is to make these paintings for me on bark.’ ‘But we don’t know how to do this,’ the men told me. If I showed them how to make these paintings on bark, I asked, would they do them for me? The men said that they would.

Robinson had his collaborators prepare pieces of bark for painting, to mix the “paints”, red ochre and yellow ochre, white pipe clay and ground-up charcoal mixed with water, which they used for re-tracing their cave paintings and for their body-paintings and to find the thick, fleshy stem of the tree-orchid (1976:17–1); 24 ‘The Murinbata men needed only one lesson. In no time they were bringing in unique bark paintings to me. I had never seen their kind of painting before’.

Tjimari had related to Robinson a long tradition of the rainbow serpent, Kunmangkurr, ‘the main ancestral being and cult hero in the Murinbata tribe’, and the paintings that Tjimari made for him were ‘part of the dramatic myth of the Rainbow Serpent...All were carefully explained to me, and all belonged to the traditions he gave me’ (1976:172–3).

After his return to Sydney, Robinson sold four Port Keats paintings to the then National Art Gallery of New South Wales. One by Tjimari was reproduced in colour in *Australian Aboriginal Art* (Tuckson n.d.).

**A painterly revolution**

From his perspective, Robinson had encouraged a revolutionary transformation in Port Keats; the religious iconography of ancient times had been translated into a new medium, and the lives of the painters would be further transformed by entry into the wider economy; indeed, this process would be instrumental in defining the identity of Port Keats painters.

Robinson’s account of his 1954 visit was publicised by Kupka (1965) in an early and major work on Indigenous Australian painting; it seems likely that this is the source of the view that bark-painting began in Port Keats in the mid-1950s, although one not acknowledged in later accounts.

**Discussion**

Given the widespread use of bark-painting documented for the historical past of Indigenous Australia, how could it not have been a long tradition in the Port Keats area, one extending back in time well before the establishment of the mission in 1935? There is no reason to doubt that there was a tradition, of considerable antiquity, of painting in the region. Stanner (1973; Flood 1970:35, 30) excavated many rounded lumps of ochre from...
all strata at the painted Yarar site, the lower levels of which were dated to about 3400 years BP. Images in rock-shelters in the region have been dated to several thousand years ago (Watchman et al. 2004). Rock-marking, body-painting and sand-sculpture probably have associations common to the painting of portable items. Bandak and other early Murrinhpatha painters replicated images — especially those of ‘Kunmangkurr’ — found in rock-shelters in the region, and motifs recorded in rock-markings are being replicated in contemporary bark-paintings. Stones and wooden boards were incised and painted in the past. The role of tjurunga — oval stones incised with sacred stories — is well attested, but painted stones are less well known; examples of the latter have been recorded in situ in the region (Figure 9).

The views of Martin and Wilson are antithetical to the account by Robinson followed by most commentators. How to evaluate the various pieces of evidence advanced by them in support of the antiquity of bark-painting at Port Keats?29

Evidence of pre-1954 bark-painting

Two artefacts in the Oakland Museum collections identified by senior men during their visit to San Francisco in 1994 were a ‘...beautifully painted woomera carved from traditional kapok wood’ and a painted coolamon (‘baby cradle’) (Martin 1994:111). The spear-thrower was identified as originating from the Wadeye–Port Keats area on the basis of painting style and particular totemic animals represented; the second item was considered to have derived from the Kimberley.30 Both had been obtained in Darwin towards the end of the previous century and held in the museum since 1915. Martin traced the donation of the woomera to a San Francisco dentist named Rabe, who had worked in Darwin in November 1889; he noted that road access to the Daly River, with its mines and the Jesuit mission at Hermit Hill, would have allowed Murrinhpatha items to be brought to the Darwin market, and suggested that a descriptor as vague as ‘Kimberley’ or ‘Western Australia’ might have sufficed for the transaction, and that the artefacts would have been brought to San Francisco on Rabe’s return there.31 Accepting the origin of these items — and Martin pointed to minor uncertainties in the documentation — what of their contribution to the present discussion? The woomera is illustrated in Figure 10; its design includes various animals recognisable as Murrinhpatha totems; these are painted as dark solids partially outlined with white dots and the background comprises snake-like forms and more white dots, elements also found on bark-paintings from this region. The coolamon is similar. Neither, however, is a painting on bark, and cannot be direct evidence of the antiquity of bark-painting in the region.

The two paintings identified by Wilson (2000:22) in the Kluge–Ruhe collection as likely to have been produced prior to the Second World War II he described as being painted in ‘natural ochres on eucalyptus barks’, and as being ‘quite old, possibly painted in the 1920s or early 1930s’:

One painting is a Mullak Mullak painting that is claimed was part of three paintings used in ceremonies relating to the Old Woman. It was found (?) in a cave. The other is what appears to be Murrinh-Patha style painting found on Elizabeth Downs Station and claimed to be very old.
Both paintings ‘primarily contain non-iconic images and share similarities in design with post-World War II paintings’. They appear to have been accessioned by the Kluge–Ruhe collection in 1993. While the ‘Murrinh-Patha style painting’ warrants further inquiry, it was apparently collected to the north of the Daly–Fitzmaurice region, and its relationship to Port Keats bark-painting is less than sure.

Wilson (2000:47–52, 91) had pointed to the similarity of representations in rock-markings with the designs painted onto barks, as has been noted by other authors. This, however, addresses the influence of designs used in both media and cannot be construed as direct evidence for the antiquity of bark-painting.

Wilson’s reference (2000:84) to ‘Fenton… (1996:41)’ is to an article by Jim Flaherty entitled ‘Reminiscences of 39 Radar, Port Keats’, where he and Fenton were based during the Second World War. Flaherty (1996.41) wrote:

...many diversions during time off...While I was at Keats, Jim Thorburn, with the blessing of F/O Bass, arranged a native exhibition from the tribe of their paintings and artefacts. It was acclaimed a great success, and the best earned prizes in the different sections ...

There are no further details provided; there was no mention by Flaherty of the medium of the ‘paintings’, which might have been on bark or on wood.

Sister Emmanuel Chapman is still living at Wadeye; she reaffirmed to us that she had purchased two bark-paintings soon after she arrived in Port Keats in 1946, several years before Robinson’s visit. Sister Emmanuel said that she recalls Mardigan and Roche painting when she went to Port Keats. While Sister Emmanuel also lived at the mission on two subsequent occasions, the second from about 1970,32 her memory is clear on the year and that the paintings were on bark; she traded coloured beads — used to make necklaces — and the coloured material that the old persons liked to wear around their necks. The bark-paintings are no longer in her possession. While we may be sure that she obtained them in the late 1940s, it is not on the evidence availa-

Figure 10: Part of painted woomera collected in Daly River area, circa 1889, and held in Oakland Museum collections (photograph courtesy J Hilary Martin)
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ble possible to be totally confident that they were paintings made locally.

We also enquired of Bother Rexford John Pye, who arrived at the Port Keats Mission in 1940 and lived there for some decades, and who is now a resident of Darwin. Asked about bark-painting at Port Keats, he responded that he thought that it started in the 1940s (Pye pers. comms. May 2008, July 2008). Father John Leary, who also lives in Darwin, said that barks were being painted at Port Keats when he went there in 1958 (Leary pers. comm. May 2008).

**Testimonies of the Traditional Owners**

Do we have to conclude that there is not strong evidence of the practice of bark-painting in the Port Keats area before Roland Robinson’s possibly seminal visit in 1954? Further enquiries might be made, but given the lapse of time, opportunities are limited. While none of the earliest well-documented painters — Bandak and his contemporaries — is still alive, their descendents are living at Wadeye and its out-stations. We consulted several of the senior Traditional Owners of Country at and surrounding Wadeye.

**William Parmbuk Thengali** (Marri Ngarr, Yek Wambu; born 1960) thought that bark-painting had started with the mission.

**Leo Melpi Maru** (Murrinhpatha, Yek Maninj; born 1940), a bark-painter in the 1980s and 1990s, did not have a clear recollection.

**Felix Bunduck Yampunhi** (Murrinhpatha, Kardu Diminin — Yidiyi; born 1938), son of Nym Bandak said, ‘... they used to do rock-paintings and Father Docherty gave them the idea of making bark paintings. The first artists were Bandak, Roche, Brinken, Indji and Mardigan.’ Felix was not sure when they started.

**Deacon Boniface Ngiparl Perdert** (Murrinhpatha, Kardu Diminin — Yidiyi; born 1936) thought that Brother Pye had introduced the bark-painting idea, but was not sure and wanted to check with his uncle, Patrick Nudjulu Palibu.

**Patrick Nudjulu Palibu** (Magati Ke, Rak Naninh clan; born c. 1930) said that, before the mission came, the old people painted the walls on the inside of their bark houses and also in the rock-shelter at Yederr, \(^{33}\) where motifs included a wallaby and hand-stencils. He said that the earliest painters at the Port Keats Mission were Nym Bandak and Charlie Roche Nganbe. After the war they had the idea that they could trade bark-paintings with Father Docherty. They painted on bark and traded the barks for tobacco and other goods with Father Docherty; there was no money at the mission then.

**Elizabeth Cumaiyi Kalinhkun** (Murrinhpatha, Rak Yirrmirnhinu/Yek Nangu clan; born circa 1927) said that Charlie Roche Nganbe (Murrinhpatha, Rak Kirnmu) was the first to paint on bark, and was followed by Bandak; this was ‘after the war’.

**Gregory Mulinthin** (Murrinhpatha, Kardu Diminin clan) said that he could not remember properly, but he said that Bandak started painting after the war.

**Manman Mary Magdalen Dungoi** (Murrinhpatha, Rak Yirrmirnhinu/Yek Nangu; born circa 1920), wife of the late painter and songman Joe Biarri (Murrinhpatha, Kardu Diminin), said that Nym Bandak was the first and Charlie Roche the second painter. Manman said that they started during the wartime. Her husband, Biarri, and others started later. Before the mission they used to paint in rock-shelters and on persons’ bodies. She said that Bandak came up with the idea of bark-painting by himself.

**Conclusion**

Many senior men and women at Wadeye and its out-stations have excellent memories of important past events, including those associated with the development of the mission, the changes in administration and related matters; many are great narrators of traditional stories and of the circumstances surrounding particular events in the past decades. While the majority of testimonies reported tend to support the view that bark-painting was, indeed, a late-war or postwar practice, the testimony is vague concerning the circumstances of any introduction — except perhaps for the reason to its adoption: the desire for Western goods. Any contribution to the (re-)introduction of bark-painting by the visitor Roland Robinson seems to have been forgotten.

The account by Patrick Nudjulu, leader of the Kuy community, \(^{34}\) leaves open the possibility that bark-painting was an occasional practice pre-Robinson, and that it was only later developed as a more than minor occupation for men resident...
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at Port Keats. This would fit with the account by Sister Emmanuel Chapman, who exchanged non-cash items for barks in the late 1940s. It is probably pertinent that her exchange was only a few years after the re-location of the mission to the inland site at Yidiyi and a period when the small population—little more than one hundred persons—was fully engaged in building mission infrastructure and alternating with half the residents between the new site and subsistence activities on clan territories (Stanner 1973; Pye 1975). A decade later, the settlement was well established with a larger, more permanent population, and men had more opportunity to consider the availability of luxury goods and the means to obtain them. In this case, Robinson’s impetus would have been opportune and timely: it followed the end of inter-clan fighting (Pye 1973:34) and coincided with the availability of the 1930s warriors (men like Tjimari and Bandak who had assisted with the foundation of the settlement and had energetically worked to build it—while also continuing the ‘new’ old way) to turn their energies and talents to an activity more profitable within the new order of mission and broader Western culture. We might not know whether painting on bark in particular had been continued through the decades of disruption—of internecine fighting, killings of outsiders and the consequent incursions of the Northern Territory Mounted Police. The movement promoted by Bandak, Roche and others was an ideal opportunity for the transformation of a traditional activity into a commercial practice, one that not only reinforced the identity of members of the community but also, given the abilities of that early group of painters sitting in the grounds of the presbytery to adapt their religious iconography to a new medium, was most profitable in the terms of the Western world into which they were inevitably and not entirely reluctantly drawn.

There is another possibility to consider. Patrick Nudjulu, Manman Dungoi, Elizabeth Kalinkhun and others reminded us that Nym Bandak and Charlie Roche were the first painters at Port Keats and that they had started during the war or soon afterwards. Bandak and Roche had been good friends for years before the mission was founded. Bandak, who was in Darwin when Docherty was preparing his provisions for the start of the mission, probably had seen others painting on bark there, where barks were sold to visiting dentists and others. While painting on bark—as with painting on rock-walls and bodies—was probably an ancient activity in some areas (as reported by Patrick Nudjulu)—whether or not it was a continuing practice in the region earlier in the twentieth century—Bandak would have observed the commercial potential, and considered painting an opportunity for trade in the limited circumstances of the remote Port Keats Mission. He and Roche could have approached Richard Docherty—who was in regular contact with authorities in Darwin—with the idea of trading in bark-paintings. There was also the possibility of sales to Royal Australian Air Force personnel based at Mt Godwin who were visitors to the mission settlement and where Port Keats men occasionally were employed as labourers (Flaherty 1996).

Finally, it is interesting to speculate on the role of the Daly–Fitzmaurice landscapes in this development. The region varies widely from coastal beaches, riverine lagoons and swamps to rugged uplands—particularly in the south and east—with concordant changes to vegetation and fauna. The uplands provide the opportunity for excellent wet-season shelters. The best of these are replete with rock-markings—a well-attested wet-season activity. In much of the region, those not able to repair to uplands would have used bark shelters. Elsewhere in the north of Australia, painting of bark shelters has been recorded, in the isolated Daly–Fitzmaurice region any evidence was unnoticed and soon lost. While it appears that by the time that Stanner (1960) was working with Bandak at Ngarde, rock-painting had not been done in the area for many years, this did not stop Bandak from expertly repainting the images there. Similarly, the re-establishment and commercial development of bark-painting was only a similar encouragement away: the act that Robinson might have considered revolutionary was more likely a continuation of well-established cultural practices.

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NOTES
1. Those works collected for the National Ethnographic Collection and held by AIAS were transferred to the National Museum of Australia. However, there are no paintings from Port Keats collected by Kupka (David Kaus (National Museum of Australia) 2008, pers. comm., March 2008).
2. Nemarluk (c 1911–1940); NT Police photograph reproduced by Idriss (1940 facing page 164).
6. Masonite apparently first was used at Port Keats and was a significant innovation, although other non-bark materials might have been previously as a painting medium.
7. In an earlier account, Morphy (1977:209) described how the design of a Yolngu sand-sculpture ‘…in its new medium, as a commercial bark painting…still contains many of its symbolic connotations’.
8. West and Barber (2007:117) described Indigenous painting movements as the product of rapid social change, an innovative response to external cultural influences; Mission residents, in particular, ‘…used their art as a way of asserting cultural value in the face of an often hostile opposition to ceremonial practices’.
9. The Old Church was under construction in 1949. Father John Leary commissioned the painting soon after his arrival in December 1958 (Leary pers. comm. March 2008).
11. This building was dismantled in 2004 on the instigation of the then priest, who was concerned about its dilapidated state.
13. These painters were Cletus Dumoo, Lawrence Kolumboort, Giuseppe Lantjin, Wilfred Madigan, Leo Melpi, his nephew Angus Melpi, Robin Nilco and William Parmbuk.
16. Kupka (1965:14–15) reported that he had made four trips to Australia in pursuit of his researches; he was supported by the Basle Ethnographical Museum and much of his collection was lodged there. Two works by Bandak commissioned by Kupka in 1960 were in the collections of the Musée National Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie, now presumably in the Musée du Quai Branly.
17. As noted by Sutton 1988:58 fn53.
18. Along with a partner whose paints they abandoned to Albert Namatjura: ‘I had been awarded a Fellowship to actually go out, range the continent, to collect Aboriginal mythology.’ The Fellowship was worth £600. ‘I would spend nine months in the Centre and the Northern Territory gathering the myths, then spend three months at home preparing them for publication’ (Robinson 1976:113).
19. Taylor (1996:ch. 2) has written on the development of the market in bark-painting in western Arnhem Land (also references cited there).
20. ‘I remember him as a tall, spare man with an ascetic face. He was kindly towards Solveig and me, but I could see that he was no fool. As I told the Bishop about the work I was doing, he showed me the large, gold cross he wore over his vestments. He showed us how he had had it designed in Aboriginal motifs.’ ‘This was the time when the new Catholic Cathedral was being built…Later on, he commissioned a Czech, a friend of mine, the artist Karl Kupka, to paint a large Aboriginal Madonna and Child for the new cathedral…’ (Robinson 1976:168).
21. Including Joanne Van Os (2003), biographer of Rod Ansell, who wrote of her time at Port Keats as a lay worker.
22. Djinu Tjimari (also known as ‘Wagin’ or ‘Wagon’) was renowned as a warrior and member of Tiger’s gang – as was Bandak – in the 1930s (Pye 1973).
23. ‘ngakumari’
24. Probably bark of the Darwin Stringybark (Eucalyptus tetradonta); orchids of the Debdoorbium family typically provide the stems from which to extract the gluey fixative used in paints.
26. Robinson rode back to Sydney via Canberra, where he had brief meetings with the secretary of the Commonwealth Literary Fund to thank him for the grant, and with the then librarian of the national library, Mr (later Sir) Harold White, who surprised him by asking for his field notebooks for the library. Robinson provided these many years later: NLA reference MS 2976 comprises several bound foolscap notebooks and some folders containing loose pages, mainly typescript letters and poems and the draft of a book entitled ‘The Story of the Aborigines’. The main notebook of interest here is entitled (inside front cover or first page) ‘Field Book of Mythology Gathered at Port Keats N.T. Comm. Lit. Fellowship 1954’.

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27. Kupka (1965:134,138–9) wrote that ‘Ornamental painting...helped by outside encouragement...has also developed in Port Keats’, where we ‘can clearly trace the origins and follow [its] development’: A few years ago, bark painting was unknown or totally forgotten in this region. It made its appearance — or reappearance — thanks to the Sydney poet, Roland Robinson, who arrived there in 1954 to pursue his studies of Aboriginal mythology...Robinson gave them detailed explanations of the technique, showing them as examples the bark paintings he happened to have brought with him [from Arnhem Land]...Painting as such was by no means a novelty for them; besides, they already possessed a large repertory of ornamental motifs engraved on their ritual objects.

28. It is possible that the use of ochres in body-painting pre-dated their application to rock-shelter walls.

29. Neither Martin nor Wilson address Robinson’s explicit claim of introducing bark-painting to the area in 1954.

30. Both items had been catalogued ‘Kimberley in origin, the former less surely as ‘Kimberley or Western Australia’ (Martin 1994:111).

31. There had been Chinese and Europeans farming and mining at Daly River since the late 1870s (Forrest 1994; Pye 1996). These activities attracted local persons who became visitors and fringe inhabitants of settlements along the Daly. Such was the case when Stanner went to commence his research there in 1930. As well as Murrinhpatha crafts being taken for sale to Darwin, it is likely that Murrinhpatha were visiting Darwin. In 1906 Murrinhpatha men had been taken to Darwin, following the ‘Bradshaw massacre’ at Port Keats that year (Anon. 1906; Hill 1951:228ff); they were tried, jailed and did not return from Darwin.

32. Sister Emmanuel (born Auckland 1916) was trained as a teacher in South Australia; she arrived at Port Keats aboard the mission lugger St Francis in 1946. She left after four years, to return to Port Keats twenty years later, in 1970, and again in 1989; she currently lives at Wadeye (Chapman 2006).

33. Locally known as ‘Red Cliff’ but the official name on maps is ‘White Cliff Point’.

34. A station at Tree Point north of Port Keats.

35. Taylor (1987:27–8), for example, has noted that the Rembarrnga neighbours of the Kunwinjku have continued to decorate their wet-season bark shelters until comparatively recent times ‘to illustrate stories told to children and as pleasing decoration’. Also Taylor (1996:15ff).

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