



KEYWORDS: *Rock painting – Kimberley – Gwion – Bradshaw – Nomenclature*

WHAT'S IN A NAME? TOWARDS A NOMENCLATURE FOR GWIONS ('BRADSHAWS')

Mike Donaldson

Abstract. Distinctive, generally small, red human figures painted on rocks in the northern Kimberley region of Western Australia came to be known as 'Bradshaw figures' after the person who first described them, as early researchers could not identify Aboriginal names or associated mythology for them. More recently, Aboriginal traditional owners and Western academics have preferred to call these figures Gwions, but there has been no consensus on more specific Aboriginal names suitable to distinguish the types of Gwions that have been used to establish a relative chronological sequence for this rock art corpus. This paper presents an emic taxonomy for the main distinctive types of these delightful and ancient figures: 'tassel Bradshaws' become Mambi or Ngunuru Gwions, 'sash Bradshaws' are now Yowna Gwions, 'elegant action figures' are Dynamic Gwions, and 'clothes peg figures' are Wararrajai or Dalal Gwions.

Introduction

In 1891 explorer/pastoralist Joseph Bradshaw came upon some Aboriginal rock paintings near the Roe River in Western Australia's Kimberley region that he thought 'appeared to be of great antiquity'. He wrote in his diary that he 'did not attribute them to the present representatives of the Black race' (Bradshaw 1891). On his return to 'civilisation' Bradshaw published an account of the paintings with sketches (Fig. 1), further emphasising the uniqueness of the painted human figures as being unlike any other Aboriginal paintings in the country (Bradshaw 1892). Similar figures from the Kalumburu area were documented by an entomologist, Gerald Hill, in 1909 and illustrated in Mountford (1937). The Palatine missionary Ernest Worms, who also worked in the Kalumburu area, reported further examples of these distinctive small red human figures and noted that they were called *giro giro* by the local Aborigines who were 'of the opinion that another people, who occupied this district long before their arrival, produced them' (Worms 1955: 555).

Members of the Frobenius expedition to the Kimberley in 1938 primarily documented important Wanjinia rock art sites they were taken to by Aboriginal guides, but also recorded some 'old paintings' of small red human figures that were noticeably different

to the Wanjinias. Their informants, 'with noticeable indifference', referred to all these figures as *d'imi* or bush spirits, and in the absence of any specific Aboriginal name or associated mythology the expeditioners coined the term 'Bradshaw figures' (Schulz 1956: 48) as they were recognised as being similar to those described by Joseph Bradshaw in 1892.

These distinctive figures continued to be called 'Bradshaw figures' by many rock art researchers until recent years as no Aboriginal name for them could be identified (e.g. Crawford 1968: 81, 1977; Stubbs



Figure 1. Joseph Bradshaw's (1892) sketch of a rock art panel near the Roe River with paintings subsequently called 'Bradshaw figures'.

1974; Flood 1983, 1997; Welch 1990; Walsh 1994, 2000; Morwood 2002; Donaldson 2007). However, since about 2000, the term 'Bradshaw figure' has been seen as inappropriate or insensitive, especially by indigenous people, and it is seen by some as a 'colonial' misappropriation of Aboriginal culture (e.g. Bednarik 2000; Doring 2000). Although there are many generic names for 'Bradshaw figures' in different Kimberley Aboriginal languages (e.g. *d'imi*, *gwion gwion* (or just *gwion*), *kuyon*, *giro giro*, *bramba bramba*), Gwion has become a de facto standard for these paintings for many Kimberley Aboriginal groups — but just what is a Gwion? All small red paintings of human figures are identified as Gwions by Aboriginal people and there appears to be no recognition of any time sequence for the various types identified by researchers in recent years. Stylistic changes and a detailed relative chronology was proposed by Welch (1993a, 1993b, 1993c) and further developed by Walsh (1994, 2000), which necessitated specific names for each Bradshaw or Gwion variant. Many of these names, such as 'clothes peg figure', are now also regarded as culturally inappropriate.

David Welch's nomenclature

Rock art researcher David Welch (1990) was among the first to document differences in the paintings collectively referred to as Bradshaws; he differentiated 'monochrome anthropomorphs', characterised by tassels and boomerangs but without spears or hooked sticks (spear-throwers), from 'bichrome anthropomorphs' with straight limbs and body, and characterised by spears, hooked sticks and areas of missing pigment.



Figure 2. Mambi or Ngunuru Gwions, King Edward River, characterised by slender bodies and waist tassels.

Following further extensive investigations of Kimberley rock art sites, Welch (1993a, 1993b, 1993c, 1996, 1999) refined these divisions and established a chronological sequence from what he termed 'tasselled figures' to 'bent knee figures' and 'figures with straight parts and missing pigment'; with this terminology he avoided the term 'Bradshaw figure' altogether.

Grahame Walsh's classification

Walsh's classification scheme (Walsh 2000) was also based on many years of detailed field observations including superposition of styles and associated accoutrements and weapons. Walsh restricted his Bradshaw terminology to two main types, tassel and sash Bradshaws, although he had many minor variants such as acorn, bland, schematised and stylised Bradshaws. His 'elegant action figures' were not called Bradshaws although they were included in the Bradshaw period of his 'erudite epoch'. Walsh placed his 'clothes peg figures', which clearly superpose the 'Bradshaws', in a separate period, but still within his erudite epoch. As most Aboriginal people regard all these figures, as well as many other types such as simple red stick figures, as just Gwions, a simple 'translation' from Bradshaw to Gwion is not appropriate if we are to address the cultural sensitivities and also preserve the many observations recorded by modern rock art researchers.

Wunambal Gaambera nomenclature

In an attempt to formulate an acceptable emic taxonomy for these figures to use in my book on rock art of the Mitchell Plateau area (Donaldson 2012a), a nomenclature that would address cultural sensitivities as well as retain the relative chronology established by Welch and Walsh, I spent time with Wunambal Gaambera elders at Kalumburu in January 2012. We examined many photographs of various painted figures in a draft copy of the book, and discussed the many accoutrements that are illustrated, including the items called tassels, sashes and dillybags by Walsh. During consultation with the most senior elders it was clear that Gwion was preferable to Bradshaw as a general term, and Wunambal words were obtained for the specific features that distinguish the various types.

The long tassels hanging from the waist of some figures were identified as human-hair or plant fibre strings with feather or plant items incorporated, attached to a belt also made from human hair. The tassels were said to be *mambi* (or *maambi*) in Wunambal (see also Karadada et al. 2012: 19), so it was agreed that an acceptable name for a tassel Bradshaw would be Mambi Gwion. It is important to note that this term was never used by Wunambal Gaambera people for

these figures; rather, it uses Aboriginal words for the English construct 'tassel Bradshaw'. A typical Mambi Gwion is shown in Figure 2.

The distinctive three-pronged 'sash' shown hanging from the waist in Walsh's 'sash Bradshaws' or Welch's 'bent knee figures' was identified as a bag, or perhaps a pubic covering, made of kangaroo or possum hide and called *yowna* (or *yawuna*) in Wunambal. So these figures could be called Yowna Gwions (Fig. 3). Again this is not a term that has been used for these figures in the past and just represents a Wunambal translation of sash Bradshaw.

Walsh's 'elegant action figure' was not seen as an offensive term to Wunambal Gaambera elders, but as they are regarded as just another Gwion it was agreed that Welch's (1996) term 'dynamic figure' be adapted to Dynamic Gwion for the present purpose. A typical Dynamic Gwion is shown in Figure 4.

Wunambal Gaambera people took particular exception to Walsh's term 'clothes peg figure', seeing it as derogatory and 'un-Aboriginal'. These distinctive figures (Fig. 5) are characterised by straight depictions of body, arms and legs, and were consequently called 'straight part figures' by Welch (1993). Although they sometimes are shown with three-pronged *yownas*, and they are commonly shown with multi-barbed spears and spear-throwers, there is no universal item that typifies this group of figures. A senior Wunambal Gaambera elder suggested that these elongate figures are like *Wararrajai*, a spirit figure seen in the bush that leads people to sugarbag, bush honey. *Wararri* is the Wunambal name for the tree known to botanists as *Xanthostemon paradoxus* which is a common host to native bee-hives and sugarbag (Karadada et al. 2012: 47). So a preferred name for these figures is Wararrajai Figure or perhaps Wararrajai Gwion.

Wunambal Gaambera people were also uncomfortable with Walsh's term 'clawed hand', apparently seeing it as having animal-like connotations. Welch (1999) avoided this issue by preferring the term 'painted hands with long fingernails' to describe these distinctive paintings, although many of them do indeed look more like claws than long fingernails. So it was an easy decision to call this class of paintings 'painted hands' in Donaldson (2012a).

Balanggarra nomenclature

For the second volume of my Kimberley rock art trilogy (Donaldson 2012b), which

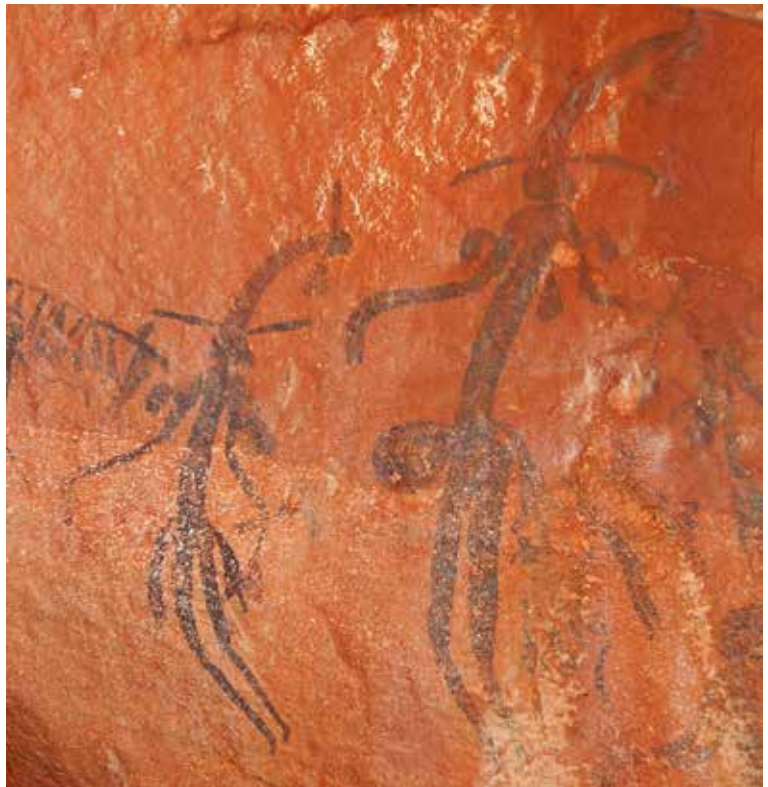


Figure 3. *Yowna Gwions, Mitchell River, with standard accoutrements including conical headdress, three-pronged yowna (waist sash), boomerangs and tuft armbands on the upper arms.*



Figure 4. *Dynamic Gwion in typical running depiction; the figure carries a multi-barbed spear and other items and it superposes earlier faded red figures. Mitchell River.*



Figure 5. Wararrajai or Dalal Gwions are characterised by straight body and limbs, missing pigment at feet, forearms and waist, and multi-barbed spears and spear-throwers. North Kimberley coast.

covers mainly the north Kimberley area subject of the Balanggarra Combined Native Title claim in traditional lands of the Kwini people, I spent time in Wyndham in April 2012 discussing nomenclature with senior heritage custodians. Although Kwini people have previously been recorded as calling the 'Bradshaw' figures *giro giro* (e.g. Worms 1955), they were happy for the term Gwion to be used and acknowledged that it has become an accepted term in the broader Kimberley Aboriginal community.

The tassels identified as *mambi* by Wunambal Gaambera elders were said to be just extensions of the hair belt, *ngunuru* in their language, so their preferred term for this type of Gwion was Ngunuru Gwion. Again, this is not a term that they have applied to these paintings previously; it is simply a translation of 'tassel Bradshaw' into Kwini language.

The distinctive three-pronged sash called *yowna* by Wunambal elders was similarly identified by the Balanggarra elders, and the term Yowna Gwion was deemed acceptable for these figures.

The Wunambal word *Wararrajai* was not seen as appropriate for this type of figure (the 'clothes peg figure' of Walsh) in Balanggarra country. When prompted for an alternative, it was suggested that they are just 'skinny gwions', so the Kwini word for skinny, *dalal*, gives Dalal Gwion.

Other Kimberley language groups

Discussions were also held with elders from other Kimberley language groups including Miriuwung, Worora and Ngarinyin. While some other words

were offered, such as the Ngarinyin word *walbud* for the *yowna* 'sash' (see also Doring 2000), there were no strong suggestions for alternate names and to avoid unnecessary complications in nomenclature, the Balanggarra terminology was also used in Donaldson (2013) which covers a large area of the Kimberley, including the areas of these language groups.

Discussion

For more than twenty years, while bushwalking the Kimberley rivers, I photographed and documented many rock art sites in remote areas. In recent years many people have expressed interest in getting access to these images for research or cultural purposes, so to make them available to a wide audience and with the approval of the traditional Aboriginal custodians, I collated key images into a series of books (Donaldson 2012a, 2012b, 2013). I wanted to use terminology that was acceptable to the traditional owners but also retain the sub-divisions recognised by rock art researchers, especially Grahame Walsh and David Welch. As many names are used for these distinctive figures by different

Aboriginal language groups across the Kimberley, I initially planned to use Walsh's (2000) nomenclature as it has been the most widely used by (non-Aboriginal) researchers, and his publications provide the most detailed classification of these paintings. However, time spent discussing these images with traditional owners at Kalumburu, Wyndham, Kununurra and Derby convinced me of the legitimacy of their concerns with the Walsh terminology (in particular). As I could see no benefit in publishing a book on rock art that was in any way offensive to the recently recognised Native Title holders of the lands involved and the traditional custodians of the rock art, I agreed to use names they were comfortable with. As already stressed above, these terms were not previously used for the Gwion figures by Aboriginal people and they simply represent Aboriginal words acceptable to the traditional owners. Figure 6 summarises the nomenclature introduced in this paper and gives the equivalent names used by Welch (1993a, 1993b, 1993c, 1999) and Walsh (1994, 2000).

Whatever names we use to categorise these painted human figures in the rock art literature does not alter their age or place in the Kimberley rock art sequence. I accept that the terminology introduced here is just a start towards a more comprehensive nomenclature for the various styles of Kimberley rock art and it is hoped that continuing research and documentation of the rich legacy of Kimberley rock art will provide further clarification that will lead to a better understanding of the rock art sequence.



Donaldson (2012b)	<i>Ngunuru Gwion</i>	<i>Yowna Gwion</i>	<i>Dynamic Gwion</i>	<i>Dalal Gwion</i>
Donaldson (2012a)	<i>Mambi Gwion</i>	<i>Yowna Gwion</i>	<i>Dynamic Gwion</i>	<i>Wararrajai Figure</i>
Walsh (1994, 2000)	<i>Tassel Bradshaw</i>	<i>Sash Bradshaw</i>	<i>Elegant Action Figure</i>	<i>Clothes Peg Figure</i>
Welch (1993, 1999)	<i>Tasselled Figure</i>	<i>Bent Knee Figure</i>	<i>Dynamic Figure</i>	<i>Straight Part Figure</i>

Figure 6. Summary of nomenclature as discussed in this paper. Donaldson (2012a) names are Wunambal Gaambera words, Donaldson (2012b) names are Balanggarra preferred terms.

Acknowledgments

I thank traditional owners Lily Karadada, Sylvester Mangolamara and Ester Waina (Wunambal Gaambera); Ambrose Mungala Chalarimeri, Mary Taylor, Clement Moortdj and Pauline Unghango (Balanggarra); Ju Ju Burriwee Wilson (Miriuwong), Leah Umbugai and Donny Woolagoodja (Worora) and Paddy Neowarra (Ngarinyin) for their time in discussing this issue of nomenclature. David Welch is thanked for useful comments on the text.

Dr Mike Donaldson
Wildrocks Publications
P.O. Box 930
Mount Lawley, WA 6929
Australia
mikedonaldson@westnet.com.au

REFERENCES

- BEDNARIK, R. G. 2000. Rock art glossary. *Rock Art Research* 17: 147–155.
- BRADSHAW, J. 1891. Journal of Joseph Bradshaw from 31 January to 6 June 1891. Unpubl. ms, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
- BRADSHAW, J. 1892. Notes on a recent trip to Prince Regent's River. *Royal Geographical Society of Australia (Victorian Branch) Transactions* 9: 90–103.
- CRAWFORD, I. M. 1968. *The art of the Wandjina*. Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
- CRAWFORD, I. M. 1977. The relationship of Bradshaw art in north-west Kimberley. In P. J. Ucko (ed.), *Form in Indigenous Art*, pp. 357–369. Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra.
- DONALDSON, M. 2007. Overview of Kimberley rock art. In M. Donaldson and K. F. Kenneally (eds), *Rock art of the Kimberley*, pp. 1–24. Kimberley Society, Perth.
- DONALDSON, M. 2012a. *Kimberley Rock Art — Volume One: Mitchell Plateau Area*. Wildrocks Publications, Perth.
- DONALDSON, M. 2012b. *Kimberley Rock Art — Volume Two: North Kimberley*. Wildrocks Publications, Perth.
- DONALDSON, M. 2013. *Kimberley Rock Art — Volume Three: Rivers and Ranges*. Wildrocks Publications, Perth.
- DORING, J. 2000. *Gwion Gwion: secret and sacred pathways of the Ngarinyin people of Australia*. Koenemann, Köln, Germany.
- FLOOD, J. 1983. *Archaeology of the Dreamtime*. Collins, Sydney.
- FLOOD, J. 1997. *Rock art of the Dreamtime: images of ancient Australia*. Angus & Robertson, Sydney.
- KARADADA, J., LILY KARADADA, W. GOONACK, G. MANGOLAMARA, W. BUNJUCK, LOUIS KARADADA, B. DJANGHARA, S. MANGOLAMARA, J. OOBAGOOMA, A. CHARLES, D. WILLIAMS, R. KARADADA, T. SAUNDERS and G. WIGHTMAN 2011. *Ulunguu plants and animals: Aboriginal biological knowledge from Wunambal Gaambera Country in the north-west Kimberley, Australia*. Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation, Wyndham.
- MORWOOD, M. J. 2002. *Visions from the past: the archaeology of Australian Aboriginal art*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- MOUNTFORD, C. P. 1937. Examples of Aboriginal art from Napier Broome Bay and Parry Harbour, north-western Australia. *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia* 61: 30–40.
- SCHULZ, A. S. 1956. North-west Australian rock paintings. *Memoirs of the National Museum of Victoria* 20. National Museum of Victoria, Melbourne.
- STUBBS, D. 1974. *Prehistoric art of Australia*. Macmillan, Melbourne.
- WALSH, G. L. 1994. *Bradshaws: ancient rock paintings of north-west Australia*. Edition Limitee, Geneva.
- WALSH, G. L. 2000. *Bradshaw art of the Kimberley*. Takarakka Nowan Kas Publications, Toowong, Brisbane.
- WELCH, D. M. 1990. The bichrome art period in the Kimberley, Australia. *Rock Art Research* 7: 110–124.
- WELCH, D. M. 1993a. Early naturalistic human figures in the Kimberley, Australia. *Rock Art Research* 10: 24–37.
- WELCH, D. M. 1993b. Stylistic change in the Kimberley rock art, Australia. In M. Lorblanchet and P. G. Bahn (eds), *Rock art studies: the post stylistic era or: where do we go from here?* pp. 99–113. Oxbow Monograph 35, Oxbow Books, Oxford.
- WELCH, D. M. 1993c. The early rock art of the Kimberley, Australia: developing a chronology. In J. Steinbring, A. Watchman, P. Faulstich, and P. S. C. Taçon (eds), *Time and space*, pp 13–21. Occasional AURA Publication 8, Australian Rock Art Research Association, Melbourne.
- WELCH, D. M. 1996. Simple human figures in Kimberley rock art, Western Australia. *The Artefact* 19: 73–89.
- WELCH, D. M. 1999. Cultural change in the Kimberley rock art, Western Australia. *Bollettino del Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici* 31/32: 288–312.
- WORMS, E. A. 1955. Contemporary and prehistoric rock paintings in central and northern North Kimberley. *Anthropos* 50: 546–566.