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THE BUFFAROO: A 'FIRST-SIGHT' DEPICTION OF INTRODUCED BUFFALO IN THE ROCK ART OF WESTERN ARNHEM LAND, AUSTRALIA

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Abstract. Injalak Hill in western Arnhem Land is known for its extraordinary wealth of rock art imagery spanning thousands of years. This corpus of rock art speaks to the changing nature of life and culture in this region — and to the skills of the many artists who added their marks over time. This includes artists working in the 'contact' period who continued to create rock art in the face of increasing incursions into their lands, disease, and frontier violence. Hidden within a secluded rock shelter on Injalak Hill, one particular rock painting tells a special story of culture contact. Nicknamed by Aboriginal Traditional Owners as the 'Buffaroo', it most probably represents an amalgamation of a traditional subject — the *kunj* or kangaroo — with a newly introduced animal – the *nganaparru* or water buffalo. In this paper, we argue that the Buffaroo represents a 'first-sight' painting – one that was produced before the artists became truly familiar with water buffaloes. This life-size painting most likely embodies a period of experimentation for Aboriginal artists before they had become fully acquainted with depicting this newly introduced animal in this region. Furthermore, this painting also hints at a process whereby *nganaparru* became integrated into artistic and cultural systems in northern Australia.

Introduction

> Rock art embodies, absorbs, and dominates the foreign, the strange, the new, and the other within a structure previously built to support it, signify it, and appropriate it, at least in the symbolic field […] Therefore, tensions develop between the new and the old, the own and the foreign, and they end up in the construction and production of an art that reinforces identity and at the same time changes, resists, and accommodates moving forward and backward (Recalde and Navarro 2015: 58).

Hidden within a rockshelter on Injalak Hill, near the Gunbalanya (Oenpelli) township in western Arnhem Land, lies a unique painting that tells a story of culture contact (Figs 1–3). This painting, nicknamed by Aboriginal Traditional Owners as the 'Buffaroo', represents — we argue — an amalgamation of what was then a newly introduced animal to Australia — the *nganaparru* or water buffalo *(L. Bubalus bubalis*) — and a native animal commonly depicted in the rock art of western Arnhem Land — the *kunj* or kangaroo (*L. fam. Macropodidae*). We will contend that this painting embodies a period of experimentation for Aboriginal rock painters and provides insights into adaptations necessary to depict new animals being introduced in this region in the nineteenth century (Figs 1 and 2). In a wider context, this painting also hints at a process of buffalo being integrated into artistic and cultural systems in northern Australia. In this paper, we explore culture-contact and artistic innovation through this unique rock painting.

It has long been recognised that archaeology provides a useful lens for understanding contact between early settler societies and Indigenous communities (e.g. Harrison and Williamson 2002; Torrence and Clarke 2000). These include studies of the transformation and transferral of material culture, such as Kimberley points made from European glass (Harrison 2002, 2006), depictions of contact scenes in rock art (e.g. Chaloupka 1996; Frederick 1999; Taçon et al. 2012; May et al. 2017), changed fire regimes (e.g. Head 1994; Cary et al. 2003), and new subsistence and settlement practices (e.g. Torrence and Clarke 2000; Wright and Ricardi 2015), and more.

These and related studies have demonstrated that 'Aboriginal people were not passive recipients of imposed cultural change, but rather active agents in responding to settler colonialism' (Williamson and Harrison 2002: 4; see also Head and Fullagar 1997; Torrence and Clarke 2000; Lydon 2009). Dynamic, regionally varying narratives involving historically under-repre-

Figure 1. *The Buffaroo painting, Injalak Hill (photo by SKM).*

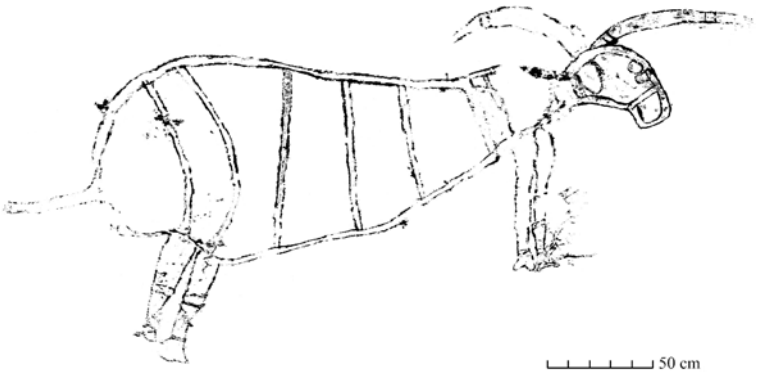

Figure 2. *Digital tracing of the Buffaroo from Injalak Hill (by IDS).*

sented phases of evasion, concealment and massacre can be observed if you 'look out into the bush, to the countryside, to the hinterland and the region as a whole, to places where indigenous people have always lived, to understand the widest implications of contact' (Colley 2000: 297). This paper takes this observation as its starting point. Using one rockshelter on Injalak Hill (Figs 3 and 4), we explore how rock art can be a tool to engage with contact experiences and reconceptualise new people, objects and animals.

Historical records provide little direct insight into Aboriginal feelings towards early incursion into their land in northern Austra-

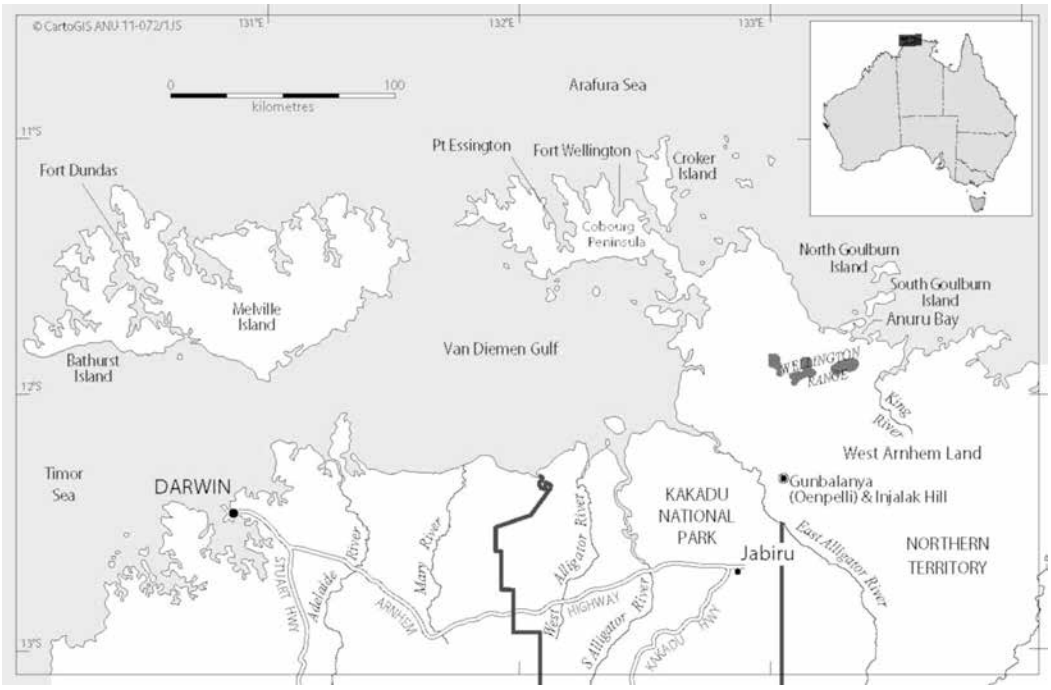

Figure 3. *Northern Australia with key locations discussed in the text (map by ANU CartoGIS with additions by Daryl Wesley and SKM).*

Figure 4. *Injalak Hill, western Arnhem Land as seen from Gunbalanya (photo by SKM).*

Figure 5. *Water buffalo (*Bubalus bubalis*), western Arnhem Land c. 1960 (photos: Judy Opitz Collection).*

lia and the new objects, animals and world-views that accompanied this occupation. Some of the only contemporary Aboriginal perceptions of the invasion of their land are provided by oral histories and rock art (Taçon et al. 2012). We here focus on one particular rock painting from Injalak Hill (Figs 1 and 2); a painting we argue represents early contact in this region, most likely between the 1820s and 1850s. While the artist was attempting to depict the newly introduced water buffalo (Fig. 5), they have drawn upon their experience painting native animals, producing a unique blend of new and old. As Clegg and Ghantous (2003: 257) suggest, ' "First sight" depictions, in which animals were depicted before the rock-artists became truly familiar with them (their main physical features and proportions), are particularly valuable — and are also particularly difficult to deal with.' Furthermore, Frieman and May (2019) argue that: 'Australian Contact Period rock art reveals a dynamic socially-embedded series of practices which allowed new ideas, new materials and new ways of seeing the world to be examined, interrogated and selectively adopted into pre-existing social structures and practices.'

Moreover, addressing how contact rock art encapsulates and expresses the tension between tradition and innovation in western Arnhem Land, Frieman and May (2019) argue for contact period rock art being used to minimise disruption to specific values conceptualised as 'traditional'. In this paper, we draw upon this previous research and argue that the Buffaroo reflects this system of innovation, conservatism and education, and speaks to a wider role for contact period rock art in northern Australia.

Historical context

Aboriginal people have been living in western Arnhem Land for at least 65000 years (Clarkson et al. 2017). Their complex social, economic and cultural life is well demonstrated in archaeological and anthropological literature (e.g. Spencer 1914; Berndt and Berndt 1970; Altman 1982a; Jones 1985; Jones and Negerivich 1985; Taylor 1996; Domingo 2011) and communities continue to thrive in what for an outsider might be described as a 'remote' part of Australia. Our focus here is the more recent history of this region, e.g. post-contact era, and, in particular, the introduction of new animal species to the area in the nineteenth century.

Interactions between western Arnhem Land Aboriginal groups and foreigners seem to have started with Southeast Asian mariners before the mid-seventeenth century CE (e.g. Macknight 1976; Taçon et al. 2010; Theden-Ringl et al. 2011; Clark and May 2013; Wesley et al. 2016). Depictions of Southeast Asian sailing vessels or *praus* appear in the rock art of north-western Arnhem Land, with one example found under beeswax rock art which was dated to the mid-17th century CE (Taçon et al. 2010). Later, European explorers moved through the area, for example, overland explorer Ludwig Leichhardt in 1845 CE (Leichhardt 1847), making intermittent contact with local Aboriginal people. European exploration of northern Australia was followed by the establishment of garrison settlements on Melville Island in 1824 CE and the Cobourg Peninsula in 1829 CE through to 1849 CE (Levitus 1995, see Fig. 3). The Cobourg Peninsula settlements drew Aboriginal groups from across northern Australia curious about the new people, introduced goods, and the technologies on display (e.g. Spillett 1979).

The introduction of water buffalo to northern Australia

Between 1824 and 1849, Timorese water buffalo were released from the three failed British settlements

on the Cobourg Peninsula and Melville Island (Berndt and Berndt 1970: 5). In his description of the settlement of Fort Dundas (Melville Island), Campbell (1834: 134) states, 'The live-stock consisted of sixteen head of horned cattle, twenty-three sheep and lambs, and fifty-four head of swine, (all kept exclusively for breeding) besides which, sixteen buffaloes for slaughter had just been landed from Timor'. For those released on the mainland, the local monsoonal conditions suited the buffalo perfectly and they multiplied rapidly, spreading down the peninsula and across Arnhem Land (Mulvaney 2004: 11). As early as May 1839 CE, buffalo had been sighted below the neck of the Cobourg Peninsula by Lieutenant Stewart of the vessel *Alligator* (Allen 1969: 352–353). In December 1845, the explorer Ludwig Leichhardt interacted with an Aboriginal man by the name of Bilge somewhere in the East Alligator River area. Bilge showed great interest in their horses and bullock, with Leichhardt (1847: 519) stating, 'Bilge frequently mentioned "Devil devil" in referring to the bullock, and I think he alluded to the wild buffaloes, the tracks of which we soon afterwards saw'. A few days later, Leichhardt (1847: 524–525) noted the name 'Anaborro' (*nganaparru*) being used to refer to buffalo. There is little doubt then that people living around Injalak Hill were aware of buffalo and that these animals were roaming in the vicinity by 1840.

Figure 6. *Reuben Cooper sitting on a wounded buffalo surrounded by the shooting and skinning team. Photo by Edward Frederick Reichenbach (Ted Ryko) c. 1914–1917 (Northern Territory Library PH0413/0044).*

In response to the increasing numbers of water buffalo, shooter camps emerged along the river plains between the East Alligator River and present-day Darwin in the late 1800s and early 1900s (e.g. Levitus 1982: 13–21; Bowman and Robinson 2010: 192; Fig. 6). Aboriginal men, women and children participated in this industry by shooting, skinning and salting large numbers of buffalo (e.g. Berndt and Berndt 1970: 5; Mulvaney 2004: 13; Robinson 2005: 893; Albrecht et al. 2009).

Participation in these industries provided local people with access to food rations, introduced food such tea, sugar, flour, new technologies such as firearms, and addictive substances such as tobacco and alcohol (Levitus 1982: 8; Ritchie 1998; Robinson 2005; May et al. 2017). Yet, it is also clear that traditional kinship ties and cultural obligations were maintained (Levitus 1995: Robinson and Bowman 2002). While firearms were available to those involved with non-Aboriginal buffalo hunters, they were not generally available outside of these camps (Altman 1982b: 276). As such, Altman (1982b: 276) suggests that the iron spear and spearthrower were the primary tools used for buffalo hunting by Aboriginal people away from the organised shooting camps. Indeed, Badmardi man and renowned rock painter Nayombolmi worked in buffalo shooting camps much of his adult life and is remembered as having the skills to kill a buffalo with just a spear (Haskovec and Sullivan 1986: 6).

Buffalo hunting was a dangerous activity but, when successful, produced a significant influx of meat for the local Aboriginal groups, as Altman (1982b: 280) noted during his 1980s fieldwork in north-central Arnhem Land:

> Buffalo meat is extremely popular, particularly if a fat beast is shot: like most hunter-gatherers, Aborigines place a great deal of emphasis on *gunbalem* (fat), which in the bush tucker context, is synonymous with good. The popularity of buffalo meat is even greater because it can last for from 3 to 5 days (depending on weather conditions and thoroughness of cooking).

One of the first commercial buffalo shooters working in western Arnhem Land was a man by the name of Patrick 'Paddy' Cahill (Fig. 7). After years of buffalo hunting in the region, Cahill established a permanent settlement known as Oenpelli (now Gunbalanya) in January 1910 (Roney 1974). While Cahill had planned to shoot buffalo and breed horses, he soon found that there was not enough money in either (Roney 1985). So he sold his lease to the government, became a 'Protector of Aborigines' for the Alligator River area, and diversified into farming (e.g. Berndt and Berndt 1970: 5; Cole 1975: 49; Levitus 1982: 13; May et al. in press; Roney 1985; Mulvaney 2004). Buffalo continued to be sporadically hunted for their meat and hides. Recalling her time in Oenpelli (1910–1914), Cahill's niece Ruby Roney relates one of their buffalo shooting adventures:

> Well, one time, there was a buffalo track just outside our fence near the house, so uncle decided that he might be found, so we went. I wanted to go too, so my uncle and a couple of natives and myself, we got horses and we tracked that buffalo. We tracked him from about eight o'clock in the morning till twelve o'clock and we got him… Goodness knows how many miles that buffalo walked and we went too. Then when we come upon him… the poor thing was in a little water hole enjoying himself… So he was shot. So they skinned him and uncle and I took an amount of it with us on horseback and we left the natives to

Figure 7. *Paddy Cahill and Quilp (on horses) with other buffalo shooters in the background near Oenpelli (Gunbalanya) c. 1900 (Northern Territory Library PH0238-0707).*

Figure 8. *Close up of the head of the Buffaroo showing red and white pigment use (photo by IDS).*

> finish… we went home across the plain, seven mile […] With a bit of fresh meat and later when the boys finished and had a rest, they come home with the rest of the meat (Roney 1985).

Roney (1985) also noted that the local Aboriginal group would have a 'feast' if a buffalo was killed and that an Aboriginal man by the name of Quilp would regularly ask her if she had seen any buffalo tracks during her horse rides around the settlement. Her recollections are important as the settlement is in very close proximity to Injalak Hill, where the Buffaroo is painted. When the Cahill family left in 1922, the station was soon thereafter passed over to the Church Missionary Society, but buffalo shooting continued to play a role in economic activities (Cole 1975; May et al. in press). Even in 1948, Margaret McArthur (1960: 13) noted that 15–20 Aboriginal people were involved in buffalo shooting and skinning at the Oenpelli mission (Altman 1982b: 276). As demonstrated by Altman (1982a; 1987; 2016) and Levitus (1982), despite the decline in the large buffalo hunting activities after World War II, they continued to be an important source of food for Aboriginal people in this region.

The Buffaroo rock painting

The Buffaroo is painted in a low and secluded rockshelter on Injalak Hill, with no open view and relatively small entrance points. This life-sized depiction of what may be a water buffalo-kangaroo conflation is located on a rather smooth surface serving both as back wall and ceiling of the rockshelter (Fig. 1). The body traits and proportions of this painted Buffaroo appear to be an amalgamation of a large kangaroo and a water buffalo (Figs 1, 2 and 8, Table 1).

Element	Interpretation
The body	Kangaroo
The horns	Water buffalo
Hooves	Water buffalo (but with some ambiguity)
Head	Kangaroo
Tail	Water buffalo
Legs	Front legs are elongated to compensate for the un-proportioned body shape. An attempt seems to have been made to illustrate the four even-length legs of a water buffalo.

Table 1. *Defining characteristics of the Buffaroo.*

The head and body length is circa 272 cm, which matches the average length of this animal species. However, the height at the shoulder is only 85 cm of the characteristic 150 to 190 cm of the real animal. The distinctive barrel-shaped body and thick neck of the water buffalo are 'missing' and have been replaced by the more conical body shape of kangaroos. Just the presence of horns, the position and length of the tail and the length of the four legs, which are finished off with hooves, suggest that this is not the classical depiction of a kangaroo, themselves represented widely in the rock art of Injalak Hill and the broader region (e.g. Chaloupka 1993; Injalak Arts 2018). The Buffaroo depiction is an outline in red ochre and is now partially infilled with white pigment. This infill may have once covered the whole body but faded due to poor conservation. The size and shape of the horns, reproduced in frontal view and stretching close to 140 cm, are consistent with water buffalo. The four hooves are roughly depicted and do not match any animal (introduced or native) from this area. We suspect the artist may be mixing different perspectives in their illustration of the distinctive cloven-hoofed shaped buffalo hooves, i.e. 'twisted perspective'. This way of depicting the hooves is similar to other depictions of water buffalo hooves in this region (see, for example, Taylor 2017: Fig. 6.3). In sum, we argue that this suggests an early 'first-sight' attempt to depict the newly introduced water buffalo, with its large and unusual characteristics, such as the big hooves.

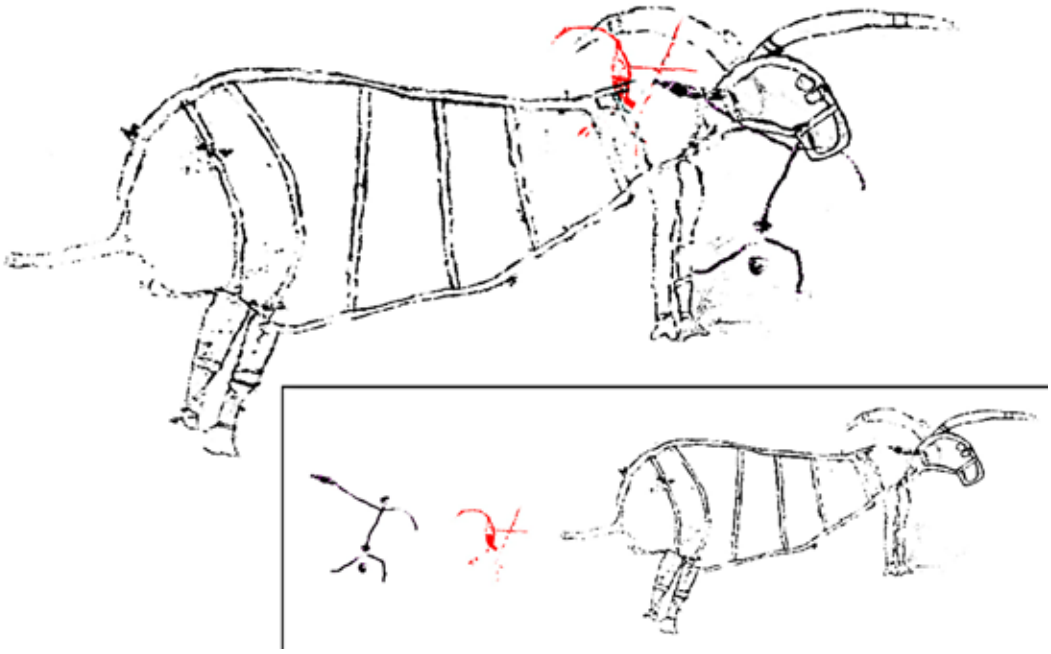

Figure 9. *Digital tracing of the Buffaroo showing the human and bird figures in actual context and (lower image) figures shown separately (by IDS).*

As already mentioned, the overall body shape of the Buffaroo is similar to a large kangaroo, as is the head, apart from the horns (Table 1). The tail is in poor condition making identification difficult but is certainly more aligned with a water buffalo than a kangaroo, even though the starting point is very low and does not match the position at the end of the dorsal line characteristic of the buffalo (Figs 2 and 9). Between the tail and the back legs, there is a bulge matching the position of the kangaroo genitals. It seems as though the artist has had to compensate with long front legs due to the tapering body shape. As a result, the Buffaroo has two very long front legs and two short hind legs but it is clear that the artist intended them to represent an animal with four legs of the same size (Fig. 9).

Painted underneath the head of the Buffaroo is a red human figure holding a spearthrower. Over the Buffaroo is a painting of a great egret or similar bird also painted in red and associated with spears. This later addition may well be referencing the habit of such birds to sit on the backs of water buffalo in this region — perhaps a later artistic addition to the scene (Fig. 9).

The decorative depicted body of the Buffaroo includes a series of double lines but there is no sign of x-ray features (showing internal organs) or other design elements such as cross-hatching that are often present in other contact rock art (e.g. May et al. 2010; May et al. 2020) and bark paintings from this region (see, for example, Taylor 1996: Fig. 13; Taçon and Davies 2004).

Figure 10. *Photo of fireplace 1 underneath the Buffaroo. The head of the Buffaroo can be seen at the top right of the photograph (photo by SKM).*

Archaeological context

The Buffaroo rockshelter is dominated by a single panel of rock art (measuring 6 × 4 × 1.5 m — maximum length, height). The rock art is located from 30 cm above the sediment level and continues until it reaches a natural shelf in the rock (Fig. 10). Cultural activity is preserved through two hearths (containing large, well-preserved lumps of burnt wood) and a variety of cultural materials (Fig. 11).

The other cultural features present at this site are 18 grinding hollows, observed on exposed bedrock and a large boulder located on the southern periphery of the shelter. The surface survey revealed a variety of cultural materials with the majority located in the immediate vicinity of the two hearths. Hearth 1 contained two fragments of charred glass and a single fragment of worked red ochre with linear striations and with no evidence for burning. Near the hearths were a concentration of freshwater mussels (known locally as *karnubirr*) and large terrestrial vertebrate cattle bone (fire damaged) and two additional fragments of glass. On the bedrock surface adjacent to the hearth two bird and small mammal bones were observed, along with a metal prong and a single, flaked piece of white

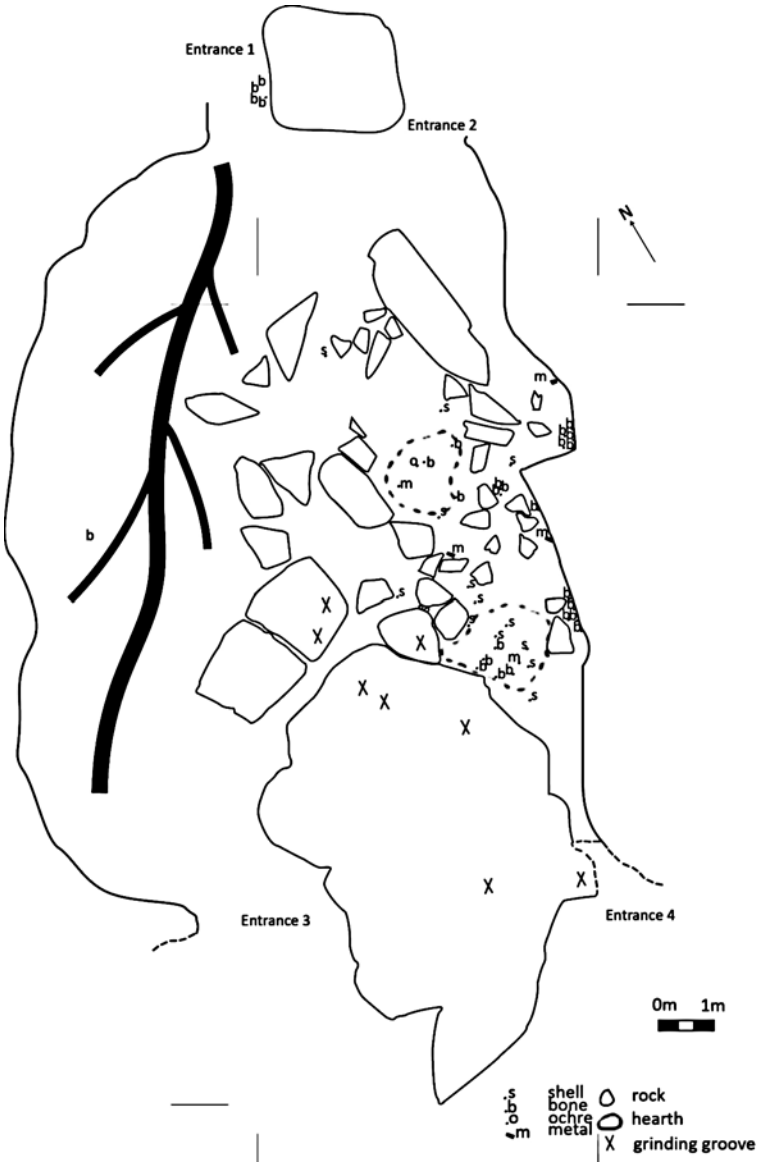

Figure 11. *Map of the Buffaroo Shelter including a surface survey of cultural materials (by DW).*

Figure 12. *An x-ray fish depicted in the Buffaroo shelter (photo by IDS).*

bottle glass.

Elsewhere in the rockshelter cultural materials were restricted to the northeast recesses (immediately behind Hearth 2). Here a tin can, two *karnubirr* shells and a cluster of three large terrestrial vertebrates (most likely cattle) bones were recorded, one of which had burn marks. In the northwest access corridor into the shelter, crammed at the base of a large boulder, six cattle bones were observed. A single cattle femur, with butchering marks consistent with a metal knife, was found one metre down-slope suggesting a certain level of lateral movement. While this raises the possibility that all bones from this section were washed into the rockshelter this is unlikely considering the broadly focused distribution of bones, the absence of visible water rolling/damage and the absence (despite extensive survey upslope) of additional cattle bone.

There are at least 37 rock paintings at this site including remnants of fish associated with the northern running figure style (e.g. Jones and May 2017), large naturalistic human figures, human stick figures, a bird, and an x-ray fish (Fig. 12). Simple human stick figures and remnant red lines are the most common subject in the rock art. The presence of northern running figures suggests considerable antiquity for use of the rockshelter, with this style of rock art dated to around 10000 years BP (Jones et al. 2017; Jones and May 2017). The rock art and the shelter itself are in very poor condition with water, fire and other factors contributing to its deterioration.

This archaeological evidence suggests intensive use of this particular enclosed rockshelter over a long period of time and continuing until very recently. While the burnt bone is most likely from cattle (Sofía C. Samper Carro pers. comm. 2018), rather than water buffalo, this plus the associated archaeological surface finds establishes that Aboriginal people were actively using this rockshelter until recent times. The presence of burnt glass within the hearths suggests the site was used up until the 20th century. This corresponds with the estimated age of all other identifiable European materials recorded at the site (Pamela Ricardi pers. comm. 2018). Local Aboriginal rock art guide and artist W. Nawirridj (pers. comm. 2007) suggested that the use of an enclosed and secluded shelter at the back of the Injalak Hill during the contact period was significant. For him, it represented a deliberate attempt to avoid the *balanda* (non-Indigenous) gaze.

Sinificance of buffalo (*nganaparru)* in Arnhem Land cultural belief systems

> There is no doubt that in Aboriginal society much prestige is attributed to a successful hunter — and as *nganaparru* is the hardest game to kill and the most dangerous, a successful buffalo hunter is top of the hunting prowess hierarchy (Altman 1982b: 283).

As mentioned, the water buffalo is known by the name *nganaparru* in the *Bininj Gunwok* dialects of Arnhem Land (Altman 2016: 73). Despite only being introduced to mainland Australia in 1829 they have worked their way into local Aboriginal economic activities. Jon Altman explores this integration in his PhD thesis (Altman 1982a), a later book based on this research (Altman 1987), and journal articles (e.g. Altman 1982b, 2016). While clearly illustrating the economic role of buffalo in Aboriginal life at a remote outstation in the early 1980s, his interpretation of their integration into cultural or ceremonial life in north-central Arnhem Land is more ambiguous.

While food-related taboos are common across Arnhem Land, Altman (1982a: 317–318) identified that some introduced bush foods exist outside of this system: *nganaparru* (water buffalo), *buluki* (feral cattle) and *bigi bigi* (feral pig). He argued that this status was due to the fact it had no ceremonial affiliation (Altman 1982a: 317–318):

> When questioned about this extraordinary status of buffalo, and why this was so, informants invariably declared 'because there's no 'business' for nganaparru' or 'because nganaparru is too big' (Altman 1982b: 280).

Yet, while Altman (1982b: 282) argues that there are no totemic associations or production taboos associated with buffalo, he does state that they were integrated into eastern Gunwinggu (Kunwinjku) mythology and art. He uses the example of a Rainbow Serpent (*Ngalyod*) called *Inanga* that has the ears and horns of a buffalo. Its father is said to be the *nganaparru*. This *nganaparru* Rainbow Serpent was illustrated in a bark painting by Jimmy Njiminjuma during the 1980s (see Fig. 13, and Taylor 1996).

Altman (1982b: 283) also found that the elders in north-central Arnhem Land associated the buffalo with particular patrimoiety and subsections. They identified two types of *nganaparru* — one with short front legs, e.g. *Yirritja* patrimoiety, *Kodjok* subsection, and the other with thinner bodies and longer front legs, e.g. *Dua* patrimoiety, *Gela* subsection. He identified that buffalo were also associated with western Arnhem Land groupings: both are *Naraidgu* matrimoiety; the former is *Yariburig* semi-matrimoiety, *Nawamud* (= *Kodjok*) subsection and the latter of *Yariyaning* semi-matrimoiety, *Nabulan* (= *Gela*) subsection. Altman (1982b: 283) suggests that, 'nganaparru was integrated into western Gunwinggu moiety and subsection classification first and that this knowledge was adopted by older eastern Gunwinggu many of whom visited Oenpelli (Gunbalanya) before the establishment of Maningrida in 1957'. In essence, he is suggesting that this integration into cultural belief systems happened earlier in western Arnhem Land (the location of Injalak Hill and the Buffaroo painting) and was spread through central Arnhem Land by people visiting Oenpelli.

Altman (1982b: 283) presents three arguments for why buffalo were not more fully integrated into cultural belief systems. First, he suggests that in the past they may have been more fully integrated but that this has dissolved due to the increasing influence of non-Aboriginal culture. 'For while in the myth context, elders stress that nganaparru has always been here (i.e. it is indigenous), Europeans have told younger Aborigines that the buffalo is an introduced species' (Altman 1982b: 284). Second, he suggests that buffalo may have been incorporated just enough to allow for its exploitation as a food source (Altman 1982b: 284). Finally, he suggests it is possible that the buffalo is still in the process of being 'fully incorporated into the belief system of eastern Gunwinggu' (Altman 1982b: 284). In his more recent work focusing on conservation issues relating to water buffalo in Arnhem Land, Altman (2016: 73) adds that *nganaparru* has an ongoing role in secret male regional ceremonies.

Figure 13. *Bark painting by Jimmy Njiminjuma painted in 1980 and titled 'Rainbow Serpent with buffalo head and horns', accession number NGA 81.1621 (Courtesy of the National Gallery of Australia).*

Further supporting this idea of integration is a fleeting mention of the role of buffalo in ceremonial activities on Melville Island — the location of Fort Dundas, one of the failed British settlements in this area where buffalo were imported and released. During

Figure 14. *A buffalo painted in x-ray style, Gagudju people, western Arnhem Land, 1914. Source: Paddy Cahill Collection, Museum Victoria (x20034) (photo by Paul S. C. Taçon).*

his visit to this island in 1911, Spencer (1928: 645–648) witnessed Aboriginal dancers imitating buffalo as part of a cultural performance. This history and cultural importance are further discussed by Frawley (2003) who argues that buffalo continue to play a role in ceremonial and cultural life today on Melville Island (see also Trigger 2008: 634).

It is important also to mention a 1914 bark painting acquired for Baldwin Spencer by Paddy Cahill and today held at Museum Victoria (Fig. 14). This painting differs remarkably from the Buffaroo rock painting but was collected from the same area. The level of accuracy in the bark painting is clear with, in particular, a more proportional body and legs. Yet, even more, interesting is the level of artistic detail illustrated. The bark painting includes x-ray detail and design elements that relate to ceremonial practices (*rarrk*). None of these features occur in, what we would argue to be, the earlier Buffaroo rock painting from Injalak Hill. Given the presence of ceremonial design elements in the bark painting acquired by Spencer, we would argue that by 1914, when this bark painting was collected, the buffalo had become a familiar animal and one that was integrated into the artistic and ceremonial systems of western Arnhem Land.

Learning how to paint new animals

> In the art system, more socially meaningful characteristics, conducive to the exchange of information and integral to the maintenance of significant cultural forms, are likely to be adopted and may even replace others which become obsolete (Frederick 1999: 141).

It is worth exploring how the style of the Buffaroo image provides information about attempts by local artists to fit non-local animals into templates that have been developed over tens of thousands of years. The somewhat 'confused' representation of this animal suggests an event occurring when buffalo were largely unfamiliar to the artist/s — a first sight painting. Proposed interpretations for the Buffaroo by Traditional Owners varied from buffalo, cow/bull, goat and horse (W. Nawirridj pers. com. Oenpelli, 15 July 2007; D. Gumurdul pers. com. Oenpelli, 16 July 2007; Gabriel Maralngurra pers. com. Oenpelli, 16 July 2007; J. Nayinggul pers. com. Oenpelli, 19 July 2007). Such variation is not surprising, for as Senior Aboriginal Traditional Owner J. Nayinggul pointed out as he stood in front of the rock painting: 'That painter don't know how to paint him'. Indeed, the act of painting might have been part of the process of 'working out' the newly introduced animal and/or codifying its emergent meaning on the rock.

Given the number of newly introduced animals into northern Australia — horses, goats, sheep, cattle, water buffaloes, pigs, to name just a few — and the importance they came to play in Aboriginal life, it is perhaps a little surprising to not find more evidence of early attempts at depicting these animals in northern Australian rock art. This is not to say they do not exist (see Lewis 1988: 411; Chaloupka 1993: 200; Flood 1997: 316; May et al. 2010, 2013; Taçon et al. 2012; Cooke 2014; Fijn 2017; Gunn et al. 2017, for some examples). The famous McKinlay Expedition rock art scene from western Arnhem Land documented by Chaloupka (1979; 1993: 195) is a classic example of 'first sight' horse depictions. It features a series of 'horses' with riders and has been interpreted as representing the 1866 McKinlay Expedition. Of most interest for this paper is the fact that while the artist(/s) is trying to depict horses, the paintings merge horse and kangaroo features, such as a tapering body shape and uneven legs (Chaloupka 1979: 94; Fijn 2017: 13–15). As with the Buffaroo, the artist/s appear to be unfamiliar, or in the process of 'figuring out', with the never before sighted animal (see Garde 2004 for another example). Chaloupka (1979: 94) states that:

> Members of his party did not record meeting any Aborigines in the area, or mention seeing any signs of their presence, but at that time of year the Aborigines would have been living in shelters high above the inundated valley floor. They would undoubtedly have been aware of the movements of the Europeans and the strange activities of the desperate party.

Likewise, Gunn et al. (2017: 174) have noted a horse-kangaroo figure at the site ARN-087/1 in Jawoyn Country. Here, once again, the front legs are shorter than the hind legs. Concerning these same paintings, Cooke (2014: 2) earlier noted that: 'Just as some European artists' first impressions of Australian fauna unconsciously incorporated visual templates based on foxes and other English animals, so too the indigenous artist has drawn the European foreign in a likeness of the antipodean familiar'. Cooke (2014: 2) also notes another horse-kangaroo painting at Kabanderri, east of the Liverpool River where the artist has 'conflate[d] equine anatomy with that of a kangaroo, emphasizing a large rump and powerful hindquarters but narrowing the body to the chest proportions of a kangaroo'.

Figure 15. *Bark painting by Harry Maralngurra c. 1985 (National Museum of Australia).*

Interestingly, this artist has incorporated traditional x-ray attributes into this painting which he argues to post-date 1867 CE when the first horses came into the Liverpool River area (Cooke 2014: 2). Cooke (2014: 6) also notes a painting of a buffalo in the sandstone plateau of the Warddeken Indigenous Protected Area. This innovative depiction includes a stylised head — with horns and ears depicted in aerial view, and bones, teeth and jaw depicted in side view. It would appear that the artist was figuring out these new animals by refiguring it on the rocks.

Moreover, Chaloupka (1993: 198–199) presents a scene from near the East Alligator River depicting two horses with riders seemingly following a buffalo and painted with x-ray features. As he states, 'Several of the region's best artists worked for buffalo shooters and became skilled horsemen, enjoying the excitement of the hunt. In this almost life-size composition […] a buffalo is seen chased by two men on horseback' (Chaloupka 1993: 198). The inclusion of x-ray design elements such as those also seen in the aforementioned 1914 bark painting again suggests that the artist was familiar with the anatomy of the animal and is also embedding their subject within the artistic traditions of the region — themselves linked to culture, clan, Aboriginal law, and more (see Taçon 1989; Taylor 1996).

There are other examples of rock art featuring introduced animals from Arnhem Land (e.g. Chaloupka 1993: 200–205; Garde 2004; May et al. 2010; Fijn 2017) and other parts of Australia such as New South Wales (Clegg and Ghantous 2003; McDonald 2008) and Western Australia (Playford 2007; Paterson and Wilson 2009), to name just a few. That said, the presented examples of 'first-sight rock art' above, illustrate that the Buffaroo is part of a wider pursuit of artists experimenting with depictions of newly introduced animals across Arnhem Land and Australia.

There is an interesting comparison to be made with paintings of firearms from western Arnhem Land (Wesley 2013; May et al. 2017). In a study of 16 firearms painted at one site in Jabiluka (Madjedbebe), May et al. (2017: 702) found that the assemblage testified to 'a growing familiarity with the newly introduced technology among Aboriginal people of western Arnhem Land. Of special interest is that the earliest paintings of firearms show less identifiable features than later ones […] which could be interpreted as evidence that the artist was less acquainted with these firearms in the early contact period than in the more recent phase'. Moreover, the earliest firearm paintings lacked the decorative infill patterns associated with individual and clan identity seen in the more recent firearm paintings, suggesting incorporation of the firearm into cultural belief systems over a relatively short period of time. So while this first sight Buffaroo painting is individually significant, in context with other rock art and bark painting examples, it may provide insights into the integration of buffalo and other new subject matter into the local Aboriginal belief systems — a process that, as Altman (1982b, 2016) argues, may still be continuing.

Importantly, the Buffaroo represents what Frieman and May (2019) describe as a 'flurry of innovation evident in early Contact Period rock art'. Not a replacement of earlier traditions but fleeting reflections upon contact experiences and their impact upon Aboriginal life. If contact rock art was being used to help minimise disruption to traditional belief systems (cf. Frieman and May 2019) then how does the Buffaroo fit into this process? We would argue that this particular painting, as with much contact rock art, reflects an educational role within communities (see also Taylor 1996; May 2006; Frieman and May 2019). Just as Aboriginal elder Wamud Nadjamerrek claimed that the recent paintings at Djurray shelter were ' "postcards" by visitors from the north coast of Arnhem Land to show Jawoyn people what they had seen' (Wamud Nadjamerrek in Gunn et al. 2017: 170), so too the Buffaroo may have played a role in communicating important knowledge relating to the dangers and possibilities of the buffalo. A recent first sighting of such a large, fascinating and dangerous animal would certainly have been a story worth telling and reflects the beginning of a process of

integrating this new creature into long-held economic and cultural belief systems.

Conclusion

The Buffaroo is an important example of Australian contact rock art revealing how Aboriginal people first engaged with new animal species and their early attempts to depict these animals before they were fully integrated into existing artistic systems. While such 'first sight' rock art is known to exist across Australia, depictions of water buffalo are rare, making this an important visual record of Australian history. At the same time, we would argue that this painting reflects an early stage in the process of integrating the buffalo into Aboriginal economic, social and cultural life. The Buffaroo lacks key stylistic elements found in later depictions of buffalo including a 1914 bark painting (Fig. 14) and later bark paintings by artists such as Harry Maralngurra (see Fig. 15). By 1914 an artist was depicting a buffalo with important decorative aspects relating to ceremonial designs and indicating a placement within western Arnhem Land artistic and cultural systems. This suggests, therefore, a rapid process of integration. While further comparative work is needed across Arnhem Land to better understand the artistic choices evident in first sight paintings, the Buffaroo stands alone on Injalak Hill as a symbol of the skill of Aboriginal artists and their ability to survive and thrive in challenging times.

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