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“OUR DAD’S PAINTING IS HIDING, IN SECRET PLACE”: REVERBERATIONS OF A ROCK PAINTING EPISODE IN KAKADU NATIONAL PARK, AUSTRALIA

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Abstract. This paper presents and discusses a 1972 rock painting episode at Koongarra in Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory, Australia. This painting, which depicts a macropod, was created by Billy Miargu when he camped at a sandstone outlier with his wife and young daughter. It was documented by two rock art scholars, George Chaloupka and Robert Edwards, but interpreted as untraditional ‘casual art’. Using a community-based approach, we re-evaluate this painting episode by (i) exploring the depicted subject matter from an emic perspective, demonstrating how it refers to the origin myth of an important ceremony, and, (ii) through interviews with the descendants of the artist, we discuss and investigate how the 1972 painting episode is commemorated and understood today. Our findings are grounded in contemporary discussion within anthropology and archaeology that explores multivocal Indigenous voices in the interpretation of material culture in general, and rock art in particular.

Introduction

We are on the move, leaving the township of Jabiru in convoy, heading for Koongarra to visit a special place. Even though we are virtually strangers, it feels like a family picnic. We first became acquainted about a week ago, when we were introduced by Djok Senior Traditional Owner Jeffery Lee, who is the principal leader of a research project focusing on the history, meaning and conservation of rock art in his clan country (e.g. May et al. 2019; May et al. 2020). After some small talk, it was jointly decided that we should have a picnic the following Sunday, so today we brought tea, bread, meat and a cake. Besides Goldhahn and Johnston, our party included some of the descendants of Billy Miargu (also known as Miyarki, born c. 1925) and Daphnie Baljur (also known as Daphne Jarlgud, born c. 1938), including their daughters: Linda Biyalwanga (born 1971), Julie Blawgur (born 1968) and Joanne Sullivan (born 1967). Linda’s daughter Ruby Djandjomerr (16 years old), Julie’s daughter Syanne Naborlhborlh (16 years old) and Linda’s granddaughter Keena Djandjomerr (15 years old) also joined us.

Our destination is a small unusually-shaped sandstone outlier that looks like the bottom half of a human, known as ‘Two Leg Rock’. The outlier is situated in the Koongarra area, close to Burrungkuy (Nourlangie), in today’s Kakadu National Park (henceforth Kakadu), Northern Territory, Australia (e.g. Chaloupka 1982;

Welch 2015). In the 1960s and early 1970s, Miargu and Baljur used to camp here during the dry season. To commemorate their visit in 1972, Miargu painted a white macropod on the rock above their favourite camping spot (Fig. 1). This painting was documented in December 1972 by George Chaloupka and Robert Edwards during their rock art surveys for the Alligator Rivers Environmental Fact-finding Study (Edwards 1974, 1979; see also McLaughlin 1978; Chaloupka 1979). This study was in preparation for mining development in the area. Test drilling had already begun. On their way out to some of the well-known rock art sites at Koongarra, and further east at the escarpment edge of the Arnhem Land plateau, Chaloupka and Edwards came across the Miargu family camping. They commemorated their visit by taking a photograph (Fig. 1). Here we see Miargu standing holding his youngest daughter Linda on his arm, while Baljur is sitting on the ground. In the background we see the recently completed painting of a macropod.

Edwards wrote in the ensuing report that the painting was created as a commemoration of the family’s camping trip to Miargu’s country, but he did not explore the context for this painting episode in any great detail. In fact, the only explicit mention of the painted macropod comes from a caption to one of his photographs in the report (Fig. 1):

In recent years many paintings have been added to



Figure 1. *Two Leg Rock. Beneath the painted macropod on the outlier, we see Daphnie Baljur (sitting) and Bill Miargu (standing) with their youngest daughter Linda on his arm. Their main camping site was situated in front and underneath the decorated outlier. Notice the salt, tea, a tin can for pigment, and a folded canvas (?) situated on the outlier, and that the macropod holds a wooden stick in its paws (photograph taken by George Chaloupka, now in Parks Australia's archive at Bowali in Jabiru, NT, published with their kind permission).*

the galleries in the Alligator Rivers Region. Top: In December 1972 Miargu commemorated a visit to his country with wife and daughter by painting a small kangaroo in white pipe-clay next to an ancient red ochre figure of the same subject. The site is adjacent to the new access road to Koongarra (Edwards 1974: 80; also Edwards 1979: 130–131).

One reason for Edwards' apparent indifference to Miargu's painting might be his understanding and aesthetic appreciation of the many older rock art traditions that were being increasingly studied and promoted by researchers such as Charles Mountford (1956), Eric Brandl (1968, 1973) and Jan Jélinek (1989) — just to name a few (see David et al. 2017; Gunn 2018); an understanding which seems to be tainted by his underlying assumptions about 'traditional' Aboriginal culture. For example, in discussing recently created rock art, Edwards (1974: 86) states:

Many of the recent additions to the art of the Alligator Rivers Region are poor naturalistic representations of animals painted in plain white or yellow ochres. Some of these designs have been painted at the request of safari operators. The artists concerned lacked the spiritual motivation of traditional times and their work has little meaning in the context of traditional art.

A reappraisal of recent rock art in the Kakadu area

Today, nearly 50 years after the 1972 painting episode, we understand that Edwards' suggestion that the art 'lacked the spiritual motivation of traditional

times' or that the work of recent rock painters 'has little meaning in the context of traditional art' is incorrect. Ensuing research has helped to create a more nuanced understanding of the many meanings of rock art in Aboriginal cultural life throughout the contact period and continuing today (e.g. Chaloupka 1982, 1993; Haskovec and Sullivan 1986, 1989; Taçon 1989, 1992a, 1992b; Taçon and Garde 1995; Garde 2004; Munro 2010; May and Domingo 2010; May et al. 2019; cf. Chaloupka 1992). Moreover, rock art images already present in shelters did and still constitute an important part of cultural life and belief for local Aboriginal people, and it is often observed that the age of a particular motif is of little to no concern for their understanding and appreciation of rock art (Brady et al. 2016; Brady et al. 2020). Such artworks were, and still are, an enthralling source of inspiration for contemporary artists creating paintings on bark and other media (Taylor 1996, 2016, 2017; May 2008; Injalak Art Members et al. 2018), fibre objects and textiles (Hamby 2005; Miller 2016), and more (Morphy 1998; Taçon 2019a).

Recently, archaeologists and anthropologists have discussed the 'intersubjective space — that place between the viewer/responder and the art that determines meaning, or where meaning emerges', in order to align their own understanding of rock art to that of its Indigenous makers and custodians (Brady and Bradley 2016: 84). For example, there are studies which try to explore complex multivocal Indigenous

voices in their interpretation of material culture (e.g. Smith 2005; Habu et al. 2008) and rock art in particular (e.g. Young 1988; Merlan 1989; Taçon 1989, 1992a, 1992b; Morphy 1999; Layton 2000; McDonald 2013; McCleary 2015; Brady et al. 2016; Brady and Taçon 2016a; Gilpin-Hays 2019; Brady et al. 2020). Such studies aim to move beyond the modernistic pursuit that tries to explore the artists' 'original motivation' behind creating rock art images (e.g. Haskovec and Sullivan 1986, 1989; Taçon 1989; Chaloupka 1993), in order to unfold how rock art is related to contemporary Indigenous cultural identities and their well-being (e.g. Brady and Taçon 2016b; Taçon 2019b; Taçon and Baker 2019). In this paper we will explore these ideas and, in particular, how some of the descendants of Miargu and Baljur remember and convey the 1972 painting episode, and what significance this painting holds today.

'Two Leg Rock' and the Miargu rock painting

As mentioned, the sandstone outlier where Miargu painted the macropod is situated in the Koongarra area within Kakadu (Fig. 2). It is a seemingly insignificant outlier with mostly faded rock paintings, yet it lies within one of the most important rock art areas in the world (Clottes 2002; David et al. 2017). There are estimated to be about 20 000 known rock art sites in Kakadu (May and Taçon 2014), and the area has been included on UNESCO's World Heritage List since 1981 (UNESCO 1982).

Access to the area where Miargu painted in 1972 is restricted today and a locked gate helps to prevent unauthorised visits. There are two distinct panels with rock art on the outlier, with few discernible figures. The 1972 painting was one of a number of paintings on an exposed panel on this sandstone outlier (Figs 1, 3, 4). None of the figures display any characteristic features that can help place them within defined rock art styles from western Arnhem Land (e.g. Brandl 1973; Lewis 1978; Jelínek 1989; Taçon 1989; Chaloupka 1993; David et al. 2017; Gunn 2018), thus their age is uncertain. Our assessment is that, aside from the Miargu painting, most figures belong to mid- and late Holocene art traditions.

When Taçon (1989) visited this site as a part of his PhD research in September 1985 he was accompanied by Badmardi man David Canari who referred to the outlier as 'Two Leg Rock'. The Badmardi clan had strong connections to this area (e.g. Chaloupka 1982) and Miargu is known to have lived and worked closely with members of Canari's family and clan members (Cameron et al. 2012: 32). Canari took Taçon to this site because some of his own rock paintings were at another site nearby. Two Leg Rock was significant to him because of its unusual anthropomorphous shape and his own associations, so he wanted Taçon to know about it. No further ethnographic information was recorded during this fleeting visit. Miargu's painting was already heavily washed

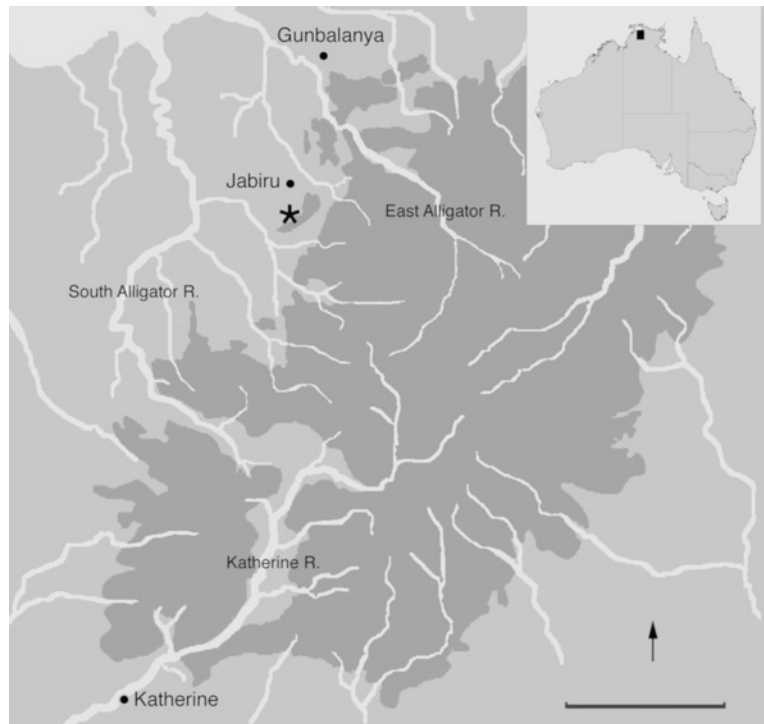


Figure 2. Western Arnhem Land with Bill Miargu's painted macropod indicated by a star. The darker grey area marks out the escarpment of the Arnhem Land Plateau, also known as the Stone Country. The scale is 50 km (map by JG).

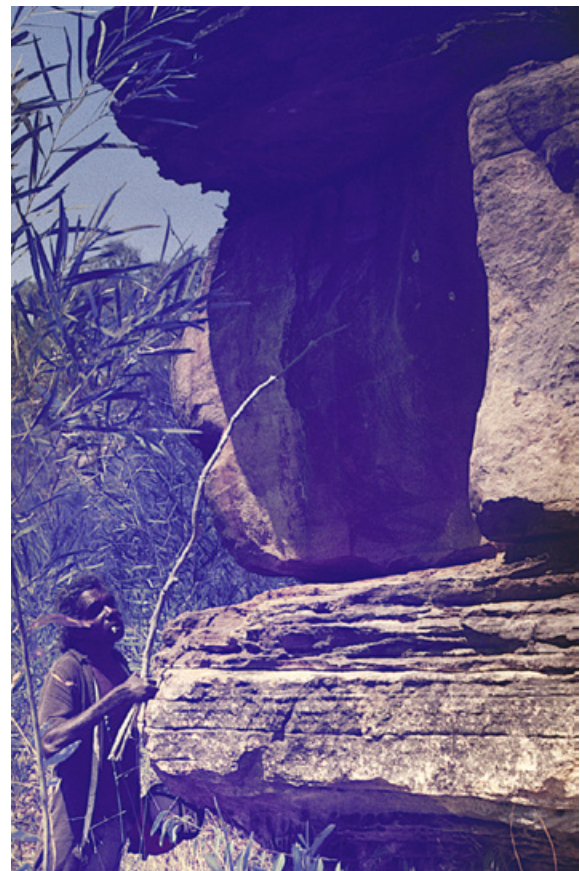


Figure 3. David Canari standing in front of Billy Miargu's painting, 13 years after the 1972 painting episode (photograph by PSCT in 1985).



Figure 4. The stone canvas where Billy Miargu painted the white macropod in December 1972, taken 2 June 2019. In the photograph below the colours have been enhanced by dStretch (photograph by JG).



Figure 5. Two examples of a bark painting depicting a macropod holding a stick decoding a vital part of the mythological origin of the Wubarr ceremony; to the left, exemplified by an artwork made of the renowned artist Thompson Yulidjirri (photograph by JG from the art collection of JG and SKM); to the right, by unknown artist at Oenpelli Mission in 1948 (after Mountford 1956: 223, Fig. 67E).

out, and only part of the contour of the macropod was visible (Fig. 3). Originally the macropod measured 114 cm from the tip of the ear to its tail, and 33 cm from the back to the stomach. When Taçon revisited the site in 1993 the painting was no longer visible. In short, the rock painting made by Miargu in December 1972 had not been visible for at least 26 years before our visit in 2019 (Fig. 4).

While taken from a distance, the 1972 photograph gives us the best view of the Miargu painting (Fig. 1; cf. Fig. 8). The painting clearly depicts a macropod created using white pigment, known as *delek* by local Aboriginal people. Importantly, the macropod holds a stick in its front paws (Figs 1, 8). Edwards, who argued that contemporary rock painters 'lacked the spiritual motivation of traditional times', did not make note of this significant detail. In this case, the macropod with the stick unfolds a significant part of the story about the Kangaroo Man *Nadulmi* and the mythological origin of the Wubarr ceremony (see Spencer 1914: 133–144; Mountford 1956: 223–224; Berndt and Berndt 1970: 119, 128–132; Taylor 1996: 87–88; Garde 2011), with a number of similar depictions in recent artworks from western Arnhem Land (Fig. 5, cf. Figs 1, 3, 8, see also Mountford 1956: 229, Pl. 67E; Taylor 1996; May 2006; Carroll 2010 for similar depictions). Many stories and details associated with the Wubarr ceremony remain secret today and should not be discussed or revealed to uninitiated persons (see discussion in Garde 2011), so out of respect we will not dwell further on this issue here. Significantly, the selection of this subject matter shows that Miargu was a well-informed and initiated artist who possessed esoteric knowledge about the Wubarr ceremony and had earned the right to paint it (see Taylor 1996; May 2006).

Revisiting Two Leg Rock

Our visit to Two Leg Rock took place on 2 June 2019. Our main purpose was to provide an opportunity for Miargu's descendants to share their memories about their parents and the 1972 painting episode. We also wanted to learn more about why the artist and his family visited the Two Leg Rock area in the first place, and, importantly, what significance this place holds for the family today.

It had been 20 years since the family last visited Two Leg Rock (Fig. 6). Linda Biyalwanga remembers her family visiting Koongarra back in 1999. They came to collect seeds from the *anbinik* tree (*Allosyncarpia ternate*) in order to make *pankin*, a traditional 'bush tucker' similar to a dumpling: "And that's when we came *here*, the right place. And ... that's the story I was telling you, about my son ... he came here, 'Mum, this is grandpa's painting', he told me".

Family background

Billy Miargu and Daphnie Baljur were born



Figure 6. Some of the descendants to Billy Miargu and Daphnie Baljur visiting Two Leg Rock, 2 June 2019. From left to right: Julie Blawgur, Linda Biyalwanga, Linda's daughter Ruby Djandjomerr, Linda's granddaughter Keena Djandjomerr (sitting on the ledge), Julie's daughter Syanne Naborlhborlh and Joanne Sullivan (photograph by IGJ).

in the Maningrida area in central Arnhem Land. Miargu belonged to the Rembarrnga language group and Baljur was Kunwinjku-speaking. Miargu's clan was Barrbinj of Yirridja moiety and his skin was Nawamut. Baljur was Barrappa, Duwa moiety, and her skin was Nalbangardi. Baljur was Miargu's second wife and he had two daughters with his first. Together Miargu and Baljur had six children, five daughters and a son, Linda being the youngest.

Due to an expanding colonial frontier, and in the aftermath of the Second World War, many people from central Arnhem Land moved west to find work (Berndt and Berndt 1970; Levitus 1995), and Miargu and Baljur were part of this movement. In the mid-1950s, Miargu was working for the buffalo shooters Keith Waldoock and Bob Cole along the headwaters of Nourlangie Creek south of Burrungkuy together with the famous rock painter Nayombolmi, Nipper Kapiirigi, George Namingum, and Jimmy Galareya Namarnyilk (Cameron et al. 2012: 32, see also Levitus 2011). In 1957 he was registered as a worker at Russ Jones' Arnhem Land Timber Camp at Anlarr (*Northern Territory Gazette* 13 May 1957: 107), later known as Allan Stewart's Nourlangie Safari Camp (Stewart 1969; May et al. 2019). At that time Baljur was working further west at Marakai Station at Mary River (*Northern Territory Gazette* 13 May 1957: 110).

Around 1960 the family moved to Mudginberri, situated close to today's Jabiru (Fig. 2), one of many cattle and buffalo shooting stations in Kakadu that emerged after the Second World War (Levitus 1992, 1995). Miargu was hired as a stockman and Baljur

worked at the school and as a cook. When the township of Jabiru was established in the late 1970s, the family moved from Mudginberri, first to Jabiru and later to its so-called 'Town Camp'.

Besides cattle work and buffalo hunting, Mudginberri was known as one of a number of hotspots for early art dealers in Arnhem Land, such as Dorothy Bennett and her son Lance (Bennett 1969; Goon 1996, see also Carroll 1983; Taylor 1996, 2015; May 2006). The family recalls how both Miargu and Baljur used to create artworks to be sold to art dealers, tourists and miners. Their work included bark paintings, spears, digeridoos, clap sticks, fibre objects and more. When asked what motifs Miargu used to paint on bark, Linda Biyalwanga answered "Old People used to paint *everything*" including crocodiles, goanna, mimih spirits, echidnas and possums. When asked if he had a favourite subject for his paintings, she answered "maybe Rainbow Serpent, Rainbow Serpent or rock wallaby, yeah". In 1973 some of Miargu's bark paintings were included in the exhibition '100 Aboriginal bark paintings' at Macleay Museum in Sydney.

Visiting Koongarra

Miargu, Baljur and their kids often visited the Koongarra area and Two Leg Rock during the 1960s and early 1970s. Edwards (1974: 80, 1979: 130–131) suggested it was Miargu's own clan estate; he was mistaken. A person's clan estate is primarily inherited through one's father, following a patrilineal principle (Berndt and Berndt 1970; cf. Harvey and Garde 2015). However, there are strong relations to other clan coun-



Figure 7. The small cave where Miargu and family found shelter during stormy weather. The cave, which can be seen on the other side of the road, to the far right, in Figure 1, is about six metres long but less than a metre high, with a floor consisting of plain sand. Rock paintings in the cave suggest it was used over a long time period. However, none of these paintings have been attributed to Miargu (photograph by JG).

tries as well, especially with one's mother's and mother mother's clan estates (Berndt and Berndt 1970; see also Merlan 1989; Brady et al. 2018). Miargu's mother was of the Warrdjak clan where Two Leg Rock is situated, so, in this case, he would have had a special relationship, obligations and responsibilities to his Mother's Country. Today Miargu would be referred to as *djungkay* for the Koongarra area (see Taylor 1996: 59–60), a notion that sometimes is explained as a 'cultural policeman' to outsiders, i.e. a keeper of traditional knowledge who is working under the instructions of senior Traditional Owners (Smith 1992). It should be noted, however, that *djungkay* is a recently introduced notion in the Kakadu area. In the beginning and middle of the 20th century these persons were known as *nawiliwili* (May et al. 2019: 210). Taylor (1996) explains:

Djungkay must protect the sacred *djang* sites for the owning clan. In some cases, owners themselves may not visit their own most sacred sites for fear that the Ancestral power emanating from these sites would physically harm them. For example, Kurulk clan members do not collect white paint or *delek* from a site in their own clan lands during the wet season. The paint itself is seen to be the transformed faeces of *dadbe*, the King Brown snake, and the snake would harm any members of the owning clan who disturbed this site when the being was active during the wet season ... By contrast men who are *djungkay* for this site may talk to the snake and deflect its spiritual power so that they may collect the paint.

In short, Miargu was responsible for caring for his Mother's Country where Two Leg Rock is situated. His regular visits to the Koongarra area demonstrate that he took this role seriously.

Two Leg Rock was the favourite camping spot of Miargu and Baljur. They used to sleep where they are

standing and sitting in the 1972 photograph (Fig. 1). A fire was sometimes lit for keeping warm and to keep mosquitos away. Their bedding was made mostly from paperbark sheets. When it occasionally rained they sought shelter under the rock (Fig. 1). When the first storms of the wet season appeared, usually in late November or early December, the family had to take shelter in a nearby cave (Fig. 7), situated about 50 metres away from Two Leg Rock. While camping in the area, Miargu and his family would fish, hunt and collect materials they needed for creating artworks. Miargu collected bark for his paintings, and sometimes pigment and a tree orchid known as *djalumardi* (*Dendrobium affine*), a species which grows on paperbark trees, which he mixed with water to make a natural fixative known as *djarlkan* (May et al. 2019: 205). Baljur collected pandanus and 'colours' to make fibre objects during their visits.

In the early 1970s, as part of mining lease negotiations and agreements, and in relation to a faunal fact-finding survey related to prospecting for mining in the Koongarra area (McLaughlin 1978), Miargu and Baljur were asked to trap and collect animals, such as possums, goannas, and python snakes. Sometimes possums and pythons were also sold to the miners who kept them as pets. Baljur was in charge of this task, along with caring for her young children. Miargu focused on hunting for food and fishing, and also creating bark paintings that were later sold to art dealers, miners and the growing numbers of tourists.

Renowned rock art specialist Chaloupka (1932–2011) came to know the family well during this time period and was involved in the aforementioned fact-finding surveys (Chaloupka 1979). The family recalls how he would pick them up at Mudginberri and drive them to Two Leg Rock where they camped during the dry season, usually over a period of two to three months. Chaloupka would pay regular visits, every week or fortnight, to collect the animals. At the same time, he brought out groceries such as tea, sugar and flour. He also brought tobacco for the adults and 'lollies' (sweets) for the kids. While welcomed additions to their diet, the family recalls that they had plenty of food from the bush in this area with yams, fish, echidnas, possums, rock wallabies, goannas and many other bush food resources available in abundance. It was during one of Chaloupka's visits in December 1972 that he and Edwards documented the newly painted macropod on Two Leg Rock (Figs 1, 8).

Contemporary reactions to the loss of the painting

The exposure to rain likely washed away Miargu's painting (cf. Figs 1, 3, 6). Even our use of digital enhancement failed to see any traces of the depicted macropod (Fig. 4). That the older paintings are still present, while this much younger and the most recent

one has disappeared is curious and contemplated differently by the family members. One of the authors (LB), for example, wondered why “Only the white, all gone? [...] Maybe if they have used glue, it would be still there, what do you reckon?”

As rock art researchers working on many continents and in different cultural contexts know it is not surprising that quite recently created paintings can vanish after just a short period. For example, some of the motifs that were painted by Nayombolmi and Djimongurr in the famous Anbangbang shelter at Burrunguy in 1963/1964 have vanished or can only be seen today using digital enhancements (May et al. 2020). This is partly explained by exposure to natural elements such as rain, but also by animals rubbing their bodies against the rock, termites, dust, soot and so forth (Marshall 2020). Elsewhere in Arnhem Land there is evidence that parts of bichrome rock art figures have faded away while other parts of the same figures have been preserved over several millennia (e.g. Jones and May 2015). The rock art that we see today is only a small selection of what once existed.

A spontaneous reaction to the absent macropod figure at Two Leg Rock from Miargu's daughters was that their father's painting ought to be repainted. When asked who would be the right person to do this, they agreed that a male family member and *djungkay* for the Koongarra area, who was selected by Senior Traditional Owner Jeffrey Lee, would be the right person to do the repainting. Despite the painting being visibly absent today, Miargu's daughters talked about and addressed their father's painting during our interview as if it still were visible, almost as if it was living in the rock itself (cf. Figs. 1, 4). The tangible place, the intangible rock painting, and the family member's recollection of the happy times they spent at Two Leg Rock seem to have merged into a past-present-and-future which embrace Western concepts of space but defy similar concepts of time. In an inexplicable but noteworthy way, Miargu's painting seems even more present because it is absent. As Julie Blawgur memorably expressed during our visit “Our dad's painting is hiding, in secret place”.

Comparable culturally infused responses and explanations have been recorded elsewhere in Australia where known rock art images have been impossible to relocate. Brady et al. (2016), for example, were told by Traditional Owner Dinah Norman about a painting in a shelter in Yanyuwa Country depicting a *yirrikirri* (donkey), which they planned to document as part of a research project. Despite access to modern digital documentation techniques, the research team was not able to relocate this painting in the shelter. Dinah explained that “Old people must have taken it away, too many of them have died you know” (Brady et al.



Figure 8. Miargu and daughter Linda in December 1972. Note the new rock painting in the background (photograph by George Chaloupka, now in the archive of Parks Australia, published with their kind permission).

2016: 36–37). Old people passing away was here seen as the cause of the ‘decline in strength of the *yirrikirri*; thus, the motif is given agency through its ability to respond to this reality, disappearing in the face of loss and decline in relationships between the old people and place’ (Brady et al. 2016: 36–37).

Similarly, the presence and/or absence of Miargu's painting was largely inconsequential to his daughters. For them, Two Leg Rock is entwined with the reverberations of their parents, whether their dad's painting is visible or not (Fig. 8). As Joanna Sullivan stated, “Paint go away, but the story still there. Story never ends. Til' you pass away. Still there. Story still there.”

A place with special meaning

Despite being one of the more modest rock art sites in Kakadu, it is clear that Two Leg Rock is a special place for Miargu and Baljur's family. Being their grandparent's Country, the family still have obligations and responsibilities for the Koongarra area as *djungkay*. Their special connection is also underlined by Two Leg Rock being the only place they are aware that Miargu created rock art. Linda Biyalwanga: “... we don't know any other paintings. Only one painting, that's why we bring our children to show them this painting”. When asked why their father created the painting of the macropod at Two Leg Rock, Linda Biyalwanga answered that he made it as a commemoration for family members so that one day they might remember him and the painting he did at this special place:

My daddy, story, memory, like memories, memory

for us, and make for the grandchildren, yeah. He said when I passed away, then my daughters will come around and maybe my granddaughter, and grandsons, great-great-grandchildren come and have look at paintings, rock art, bim... When they have kids, they can show them the painting. If our daughters will have a kid, they can show their kids the painting, maybe we will be gone at that time.

After a while Linda Biyalwanga continued to express her attachment to Two Leg Rock: "I liked to come and stay *here*. So we [...] bring these [kids] with us, you know, tell them stories, and maybe one day they, when they was growing up, having kids, they can come and stay here with their kids". Joanne Sullivan then added: "We should camp here one night, just to make the Old People happy! Maybe next time, you come around, maybe stay for one night, maybe ...".

Spending time at Two Leg Rock evoked cherished memories about their parents, but also feelings of sorrow and the loss of 'the Old People who finished up'. Joanne Sullivan expressed this when she said that: "I wish my dad sit here". When asked if there are other places where they can connect to their parents in this way, Linda Biyalwanga answered: "It's the only place. It's the only place we think about, like, his spirit, mum's spirit".

For Joanne, Julie and Linda, their parent's spirits still dwell at Two Leg Rock. This became clear when we started to pack up after our picnic. The sisters' voices lowered, and a melancholic feeling started to linger. This became even more tangible after the first car with the teenage girls left Two Leg Rock heading for Jabiru Town Camp. We packed up in silence. When we all were in the car ready to leave, the three sisters simultaneously opened their windows and called out to the spirits of their parents in Kunwinjku. After a while, the car quietly started to roll towards Jabiru. When we had passed and locked the gate Linda Biyalwanga was asked what they had called out. She answered in a low gentle voice: "We called out to their spirits to remember us, to take care of us, and that they should not forget us".

Discussion and conclusion

Our aims with this paper were to present a re-appraisal of the 1972 Miargu painting episode that Chaloupka and Edwards documented at Two Leg Rock in Kakadu and to explore the reverberations of this painting episode for family and kin. Both Chaloupka and Edwards had a disparaging attitude towards contemporary or recent rock painting artists. Edwards suggested that they did not have the 'spiritual motivation of traditional times' and argued that their artworks had 'little meaning in the context of traditional art'. These belittling interpretations were advocated without presenting any investigations or analyses of the artists' motivations to support such statements. Chaloupka (1993: 214) often expressed a similar opinion and labelled some recently created

artworks unexcitedly as 'rubbish paintings' and 'casual art'. He did not hesitate to denounce Senior Traditional Owners, such as Big Bill Neidjie (1991; Neidjie et al. 2002), and others, who continued to make rock art or retouch older artworks. These acts, he argued, were not undertaken 'to fulfil a traditional role' but were always 'initiated by non-Aborigines for a variety of not always unselfish motives' (Chaloupka 1992: 12). Similar patronising viewpoints were commonly expressed among contemporary rock art specialists, but contested by others, working across Australia (see Morwood and Hobbs 1992; Ward 1992). However, and importantly, Chaloupka as well as Edwards failed to document such external 'unselfish motives' behind Miargu's painting during their visit in 1972. Our findings strongly challenge such interpretations. Miargu's ceremonial status as well as his responsibilities and obligations for his Mother's country as a *djungkay*, must be considered as the most obvious driving force behind his painting of *Nadulmi*. Maybe the commencement of mining in the Koongarra area reinforced his commitments and triggered him to unfold this mythological being?

The interview with Miargu and Baljur's descendants made us cognisant of several paradoxes. For instance, there was a clear and intuitive consensus among Miargu's daughters that their fathers' now absent-but-still-present painting ought to be repainted. Their wish seems to defy outsiders' perceptions about 'authorship' and 'authenticity'. Would it still be their fathers' painting if somebody else painted a new macropod figure on Two Leg Rock? For us, this unfolds interesting aspects of epistemological and ontological understandings; how people with different cultural backgrounds, world-views and ontologies approach and perceive rock art (e.g. Goldhahn 2019; Brady et al 2020). We do not present any fixed solution to this paradox here other than to underline that it ought to be the subject of further investigations into the many meanings and roles of rock art.

That said, one of the most striking aspects of rock art in general is that it is created and placed in a culturally-infused landscape setting, creating places out of spaces in the process. Miargu's painting, absent or not, was not only part of a landscape imbued with culturally encoded meanings but also indicative of his 'special' relationships with Two Leg Rock and his Mother's country, a responsibility and obligation that his children still recognise and fulfil. Moreover, the depicted mythological being communicated his ceremonial knowledge while at the same time leaving a statement to his descendants to commemorate these connections. This indicates that rock art played an important role in inter-generational communications, surpassing an individual person's life, connecting them with emerging generations of stakeholders.

In this context we might ask if Miargu expected his painting to last? Rock art scholars — often implicitly — cling to the idea that the artists intended to create enduring artworks and, as a consequence, fading rock

art is often described as endangered and at risk (e.g. Agnew et al. 2015). Miargu was a skilled and experienced bark painter who spent time working side by side with the most prolific known rock painter in the world — Nayombolmi. Both lived in Mudginberri in the 1960s until Nayombolmi passed away in 1967, so it is more than likely that Miargu understood the processes impacting on the survival of pigment on rock. To choose a clearly exposed rock surface and to use less durable white pigment for his painting (cf. figs. 1, 3, 4, 8), might imply that Miargu did not intend for it to last 'forever'. The painting of *Nadulmi* might primarily be understood as an expression of his ceremonial status and as a reinforcement of Miargu's connections and obligations to his Mother's country.

The most important outcome of this research is that a seemingly insignificant rock art site with heavy varnished or even totally eroded motifs can be embedded and embody vast cultural meanings for Indigenous stakeholders. In this case, Two Leg Rock tells a story of connections to country, cultural responsibilities and obligations, ceremonial life, family and kin, and ongoing intergenerational connections to place and family members. Today, the now absent-but-still-present painting is commemorated as one of Miargu's most tangible legacies to his family, all of whom keep Two Leg Rock close in their hearts. Visiting Two Leg Rock reinforces these family bonds and, importantly, it 'makes the Old People happy'. This vital connection is essential for the family's well-being, as well as for the well-being of the Old People's spirits which dwells at Two Leg Rock. This reciprocal on-going responsibility and bond, between the living and the spirits of their ancestors, is fundamental to the health and well-being of Aboriginal communities across Arnhem Land and Australia (e.g. Taçon 2019; Taçon and Baker 2019).

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