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PICTURING NAYOMBOLMI: THE MOST PROLIFIC KNOWN ROCK ART ARTIST IN THE WORLD

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Abstract. This article presents a broad overview of the life and artworks of Badmardi Aboriginal artist Nayombolmi (c. 1895–1967) from today’s Kakadu National Park, the Northern Territory in Australia. The article pictures his life through oral history, photographs and some of his many artworks in the form of rock paintings, beeswax figures and bark paintings. It touches on how Nayombolmi and his father used rock art as an educational medium in the intergenerational transmission of traditional lore and law. Nayombolmi made close to 800 rock art figures, justly earning him the epithet ‘the most prolific known rock art artist in the world’.

Introduction

Rock art is the most tangible cultural manifestation that reveals the creative and artistic genius of the First Australians (Fig. 1). From south to north, east to west, tens of thousands of rock art sites are known across the Australian continent (e.g. Layton 1992; Walsh 1988; David 2002; Morwood 2002; David et al. 2017). For Indigenous communities, rock art materialises tangible spiritual powers that, sometimes, unfold creation events when the First People walked Country (e.g. Neidjie et al. 1985; Mowaljarlai and Malnic 1993; Doring 2000; Blundell and Woolagoodja 2005; Injalak Art Members et al. 2018; Mangolamara et al. 2018; Woolagoodja 2020). Rock art thus embodies and manifests what has always been and always will be – the present-emerging-past – known to outsiders as the ‘Dreaming’ or ‘Dreamtime’ (e.g. Stanner 2011).

Some rock art images are said to have been created by powerful Ancestral Beings that still roam the landscape, such as Rainbow Serpents and the tall, thin human-like *Mimi* in western Arnhem Land (e.g. Taylor 1996; Injalak Art Members et al. 2018). As with Aboriginal artworks in other media, rock art was used as an educational tool for learning about cultural traditions, lore and law (e.g. Munn 1973; Goldhahn et al. 2020). Some rock art memori-

alises or records actual events, such as centuries-long cross-cultural interactions with outsiders, so-called contact rock art (e.g. Kelly and Wardaman Indigenous Protected Area 2021; May and Goldhahn 2018; Veth et al. 2008). On other occasions, rock art was created to visualise and commemorate an amusing story such as the first kill of introduced cattle, or to pay tribute to a faithful hunting dog, in short: ‘What to do on a rainy day’ (i.e. Mulvaney 1996). Whatever the motivation for its creation, rock art remains an essential and precious tangible and intangible legacy of Ancestral Beings and Aboriginal ancestors (‘Old People’) that is imperative for Aboriginal cultural identity and well-being (e.g.



Figure 1. Rock art created by Nayombolmi in today’s Kakadu National Park, 1986 (photo: PSCT).



Figure 2. Nayombolmi in 1966 (photo: Lance Bennett, courtesy of Barbara Spencer).

Porr and Bell 2012; McDonald 2013; Brady et al. 2016; Brady and Taçon 2016; Taçon 2019a; Taçon and Baker 2019).

Research history

From a global perspective, Australia stands out with much rock art continuing to be created here into the late 20th century (e.g. Gould 1969; Edwards 1979; Morwood and Hobbs 1992; Layton 1992; Smith 1992; Taçon 1992; May et al. 2019; Goldhahn et al. 2021a). In some parts of the continent, rock art is still being created and/or retouched (e.g. Munro 2010; Woolagoodja 2020). As a result, nowhere in the world do we find so many known and named rock art artists, but recently their lives and legacies have been largely overlooked by the rock art research community (but see May et al. 2021a; May et al. 2021b). This article aims to highlight and celebrate one of these outstanding artists – Nayombolmi (Fig. 2), probably the most prolific known rock art artist globally.

Among local Aboriginal people in western Arnhem Land, Nayombolmi was widely known and acknowledged as a skilful artist. His legacy within rock art research was first highlighted by Ivan Haskovec and Hillary Sullivan (1986, 1989) during the late-1980s. At the time, they worked as rangers in Kakadu National Park, henceforth Kakadu. They worked closely with Nayombolmi's younger cousins and classificatory kin-brothers, Nipper Kaporigi (c. 1910–1987) and George Namingum (c. 1920–1987), to record information on the artist and his artworks along with other relatives and friends such as David Canari, Jack Namandali, Jimmy and Sarah Wok Wok, Toby Gangali and Fred Hunter (Haskovec and Sullivan 1986: 2, 1989).



Figure 3. Nipper Kaporigi in 1986 with some of his 'students' recording rock art on Djok Country in Kakadu, from left to right, Douglas Mazonovich, George Chaloupka, Kaporigi, Ruth, Paul S. C. Taçon (photo: PSCT with the help of a tripod and timer).

At about the same time, rock art researchers such as George Chaloupka and Paul S. C. Taçon independently started documenting artworks created by Nayombolmi (Figs 1, 3). Both made extensive interviews with much the same informants, especially Kaporigi (see Levitus 2015), which has contributed to our knowledge of his life and artworks (e.g. Chaloupka 1982, 1983, 1993; Chaloupka et al. 1985; Taçon 1989; Taçon and Chipindale 2001).

More recently, as part of the *Pathways: People, land-scape and rock art* project, we have conducted extensive interviews with Nayombolmi's classificatory granddaughter Josie Maralngurra (Fig. 4), daughter to the renowned dancer, singer, healer and artist Nym Djimongurr (c. 1910–1969), and others who knew Nayombolmi when they were young (e.g. May et al. 2019; Goldhahn et al. 2020). As a result, we have been able to document new rock art images created by Nayombolmi. We have also started to examine previously unexplored private as well as public archives in pursuit of new source material that can be helpful. Of special interest for this article are several old photographs of Nayombolmi that we discovered (e.g. Goldhahn et al. 2021b), which reveal some crucial events in his life. Here we highlight some of these photographs in our quest to bring Nayombolmi's life story to the forefront of rock art research (especially Figs 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10).

Introducing Nayombolmi

Nayombolmi was born around 1895. His father, Ngarradjigu (alt. name Nanggwirid), belonged to the Badmardi clan (Fig. 5). His father was of the Ngarr-



Figure 4. Josie Maralngurra sharing her memories of Nayombolmi painting a Namorrordo Spirit Figure at Nanguluwurr, Kakadu National Park, in 2019 (photo: Emily Miller).

adjgu moiety and Yarriburri semi-moiety, and Nayombolmi's semi-moiety was Narwagite. Sadly, the Badmardi patrilineal line ended in the late 1900s, and nowadays, members of surrounding clan groups and people who are connected to the Badmardi through their mother-lineage act as custodians of this Country. Nayombolmi's mother belonged to the Jawoyn-speaking Matjpa Clan, and she was Namadju, Andjarpuwa. Her name is not recorded. Nayombolmi, who was also known as 'Barramundi Charlie' (Stewart 1969, 1985), had two known wives but no children of his own. One of his wives was known as 'Old Nelly'. We do not know much about her. However, there is a Nellie Miraludj recorded as staying together with Nayombolmi in the early 1950s. She is listed as a 'pensioner' and said to have been born around 1882 (see Feakins 2019: 209). We do not know if this is his wife 'Old Nelly', but it seems possible. She passed away in the mid-1950s (Stewart 1985). Nayombolmi's younger wife was Rosie Almayalk of the Madalg clan (also known as Nowi-Bete, Nalmainyarag or Aldjandenj). We do not know when she was born. A census from 1952 suggests 1917 as her year of birth (Feakins 2019: 209). She passed away in 1966 (Sotheby's 2015).

People who knew Nayombolmi describe him as a tall, powerful man and, in the words of Fred Hunter, 'a real decent old bloke' (Haskovec and Sullivan 1986: 7). He was a skilled bushman. Kaporigi and Namingum recalled Nayombolmi teaching them

how to catch freshwater crocodiles by hand when they were kids (Chaloupka et al. 1985: 125–126). He was also renowned for being able to kill water buffalo with a traditional spear. Nayombolmi went through ceremony, was fully initiated, and is remembered as an important ceremonial leader in both Kakadu and further south in Jawoyn-speaking areas. To some he is remembered as a jealous man, protecting his partners like 'a policeman' (Chaloupka et al. 1985: 166). Above all else, he was mostly remembered for his artistic skills, having left large numbers of rockshelters in Kakadu

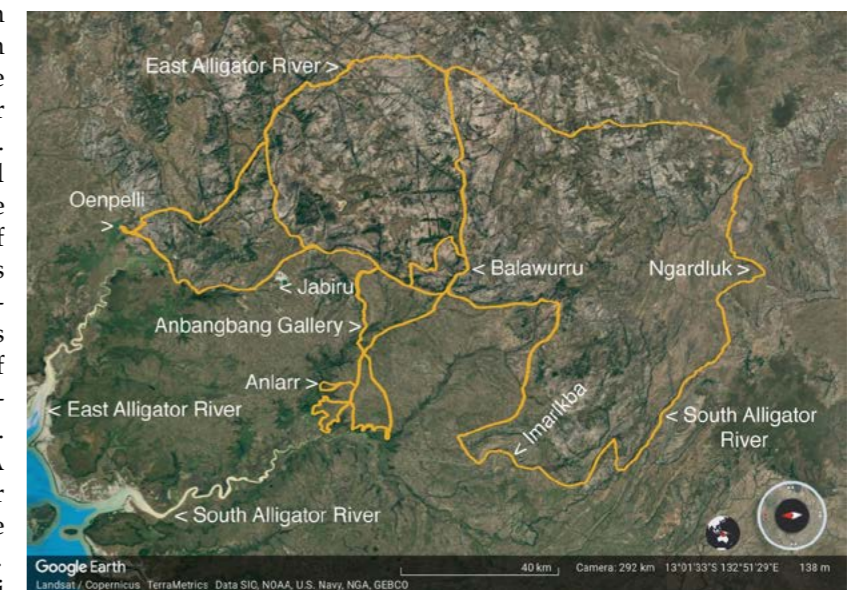


Figure 5. Western Arnhem Land with key places mentioned in the text. The yellow lines indicate travelling routes that the Badmardi made during their seasonal movements (after Chaloupka 1981). For tentative areas for mentioned clan groups, see Chaloupka (1993: 73). Barramundi Station is situated close to Imarlkba gold mine. Scale is 40 km (map: JG). N.B. North is to the left, south to the right.

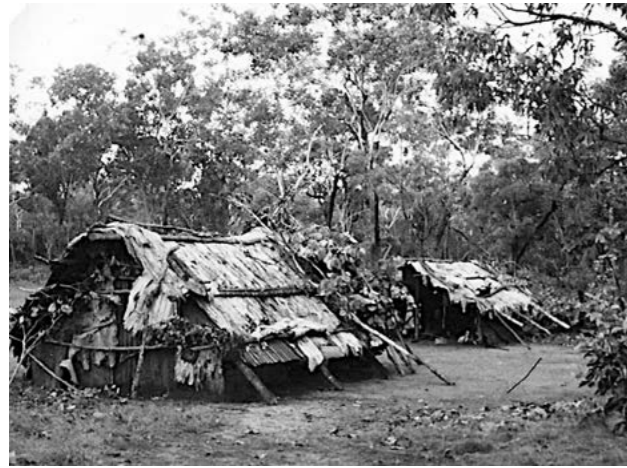


Figure 6. Stringybark hut said to have belonged to Djimongurr and Nayombolmi (unknown photographer, now in Parks Australia archive at Bowali).

adorned with his artworks. As Namingum phrased it: ‘no matter what cave, in Balawurru, Anbangbang, [he painted] everywhere’ (Chaloupka et al. 1985: 127).

Dorothy and Lance Bennett, two of the growing numbers of art dealers in western Arnhem Land in the 1960s (Goon 1996; Goldhahn et al. in press), knew Nayombolmi as an older man (Fig. 2). Lance described him as friendly but a ‘skinny and scrawny man’ that was always surrounded by his dogs. He had a good sense of humour and laughed with a ‘high pitched voice’. Lance states that he was widely acknowledged for his cultural knowledge, as a ceremonial leader and a skilful artist. Nayombolmi told Lance that he ‘always felt big happiness by painting’ (Bennett 1969: 20–22, translated here).

Childhood

Nayombolmi belonged to Badmardi Country (Deaf Adder Gorge), situated at the headwaters of Balawurru Creek, which originates on the Arnhem Land Plateau (Fig. 5). Balawurru Creek passes Burrungkuy with the famous Anbangbang Gallery, also known as Nourlangie Rock, before joining the South Alligator River.

Nayombolmi was born into one out of three known extended families, which constituted the Badmardi clan in the beginning of the 1900s (Chaloupka 1983; Chaloupka et al. 1985). We do not know much about his childhood, but it could be said that he was brought up in two worlds — surrounded by local Aboriginal traditions but aware of the encroaching outside world. There is no doubt that he grew up surrounded by skilful artists and living in painted rockshelters. Artworks were a part of everyday life. His father, his biological uncle and some cousins were renowned rock art artists. Many of his family’s favourite camping spots were surrounded by rockshelters with paintings made by his closest relatives or other known artists. One of these is the Yuwunggayai shelter, situated in Badmardi Country, to where Nayombolmi often returned. Both his father and uncle (kin father) are known to have

created artworks in this shelter (Taçon 1989), and it is likely that a young Nayombolmi was present when some of their artworks were created. Nayombolmi is said to have painted at least forty-one rock art figures in the Yuwunggayai shelter, depicting archerfish (6), barramundi (3), an eel-tailed catfish (1), some generic fish motifs (3), a macropod (1), human female (19) and human male (4) anthropomorphous figures, turtles (2), as well as images of Ancestral Beings, such as Namarikon, the Lightning Man, and important ceremonial objects (Haskovec and Sullivan 1986; Taçon 1989).

Many of the artworks Nayombolmi saw being made were created during the wet season when his family either camped in rockshelters or in traditional stringybark huts (Fig. 6). Historical sources and early anthropological work in western Arnhem Land show that these huts were often decorated with traditional rock art motifs (Carrington 1890: 73; Worsnop 1897: 37; Spencer 1914). Many of the earliest collections of bark paintings from this area originate from bark huts (Spencer 1928; Bennett 1969; Jelinek 1989; Goon 1996; Taylor 1996; Taçon and Davies 2004; May 2009; Goldhahn et al. in press). In an interview with Lance Bennett in 1966, Nayombolmi said that he often saw his father painting shelters and bark huts when he was growing up. One of the paintings he recalled, created by his father before he had ‘grown any moustache’, was an image of a malicious spirit known as Namorrordo (Namorrordo) (Bennett 1969: 20–22, for Namorrordo, see Taylor 1996: 189–190). This subject later became a favourite of Nayombolmi in his own work on bark and rock (see Figs 4 and 10; Goldhahn et al. 2020; Goldhahn and May 2022).

There is strong evidence in both historical and contemporary anthropological sources that artworks were perceived as educational tools in Aboriginal societies (e.g. Taylor 1996; May 2008; Goldhahn et al. 2020). By recalling and re-enacting mythological events through artworks in everyday situations as well as in more ritualised practices, including stories, chants, songs, gestures, dances and ceremonies, children were introduced to their surroundings, the First People and other Spirit Beings, their creation stories, the Old People, and other vital things to know, such as hunting strategies, food sharing taboos, kinship system, lore and law, and more (e.g. Goldhahn et al. 2020, see also Berndt and Berndt 1970; Munn 1973; Morphy 1991; Taylor 1996; May 2006, 2008). As we shall see later in this article, Nayombolmi also used his artistry for educational purposes.

Walking Country

An important part of Nayombolmi’s upbringing was to learn how to be in pace with the coming and going of Kakadu’s six seasons so that he could make use of the abundance of natural resources. This demanded long walks and the Badmardi clan had several known routes they liked to follow each or every second year (Fig. 5). These journeys were also key to strengthening their

social networks, visiting family and kin, participating in ceremony and more (Chaloupka 1981). During these walks, the Badmardi clan often brought desired raw materials to exchange, such as ochre and other pigments, stone for making special tools, especially spearheads, and bamboo for spear shafts (see Berndt 1951; Thomson 1949; Chaloupka 1981).

The Badmardi seem to have had a special relationship with clan groups further downstream, such as the Warramal and Warrdjak. They would visit and stay with each other as often as they could. In the dry season, the Badmardi visited their friends downstream to explore the bountiful wetlands, and in the wet season, these groups would come and stay with the Badmardi at Balawurru in the Stone Country. As a Badmardi saying went, ‘they are drinking our water’ (Chaloupka 1983: 104). These clans were considered to be of ‘one river [...]’ The visits were welcome as they allowed for the sharing of news, arranging of marriages, the trading of goods, and participation in ceremonial activities. Occasionally they also executed paintings on the wall of a shelter which they shared’ (Chaloupka 1982: 16; for examples of such artworks, see Chaloupka 1993: 226–227; Taçon 1994; Gunn 2018: 103). Some of Nayombolmi’s paintings found outside his clan area (see Table 1 below) might have been created during such visits.

As an example, a regular walking route used by the Badmardi followed the escarpment in a westbound direction until they reached the South Alligator River (Fig. 5). It then followed this river south into Jawoyn-speaking clan countries as far south as Ngardluk (Sleisbeck), and sometimes even bringing the Badmardi to Wugularr (Beswick) and today’s town of Katherine. In Jawoyn-speaking areas, they participated in ceremonies and visited family and kin, especially Nayombolmi’s mother’s clan Country where he acted as a custodian and had special obligations and responsibilities (cf. Berndt and Berndt 1970; Taylor 1996). To travel back to Balawurru again, they usually followed an eastbound route, aiming for the tributaries of the East Alligator River, which they then could follow back to their clan area (Fig. 5).

Sometimes they extended their walks to visit Oenpelli, today’s Gunbalanya. During the Paddy Cahill era at Oenpelli, i.e. between c. 1910 and 1922, these visits may have been motivated by the need for tobacco. From the mid-1920s, when the missionaries took over Oenpelli (see May et al. 2020), they also stopped to visit one of Nayombolmi’s young cousins and kin-brother who had been put in the Church Missionary Society’s school to learn the ‘Christian Way’ (Chaloupka 1981: 169). For cultural reasons, his name was avoided in the interviews in the 1980s, so we do not know which brother was sent to the mission. That said, we know it was a young full-brother of Kapirigi, either Mawirr or Gudimandak. After these visits, they usually crossed the East Alligator River and followed the escarpment until they reached the Magella Creek, which they could follow all the way back to Stone Country Balawurru

and Badmardi clan Country. Such long walks were in sync with the cycle of six seasons of Kakadu, as described by Kapirigi in Chaloupka 1981, and it could encompass annual travels of more than 900 km and enclose an area of more than 10 000 square kilometres (Fig. 5).

The painter

Nayombolmi was widely known and acknowledged as a skilful painter in western Arnhem Land. His classificatory granddaughter Josie Maralngurra told us that Nayombolmi and her father Djimongurr ‘always left painting behind’ if they camped more than a day in a shelter (see May et al. 2019; Goldhahn et al. 2020). This might explain the abundance of rock art known to be attributed to Nayombolmi. Haskovec and Sullivan (1986: 18, 1989) listed no less than 604 artworks (mainly paintings) from 46 rock art sites. These are situated in six clan countries (Haskovec and Sullivan 1986: 37), including Badmardi, Warramal, Rol, Wardjag (Warrdjak and Djok), Mirarr Gundjeihmi and Djamgolor (Table 1).

Clan	Number of sites	% of 46 sites
Badmardi	8	17.4
Warramal	3	6.5
Rol	12	26
Wardjag	3	6.5
Mirarr Gundjeihmi	3	6.5
Djamgolor	17	37

Table 1. The number of painted sites (46) by Nayombolmi per Clan Country. Source: Haskovec and Sullivan 1986: 37.

Astonishingly, Nayombolmi’s known artworks are distributed over an 1800 square kilometre area (for a general distribution map, see Haskovec and Sullivan 1989: 62, their Fig. 2.3). The number of paintings varied from 1 to 55 at a single site. According to Haskovec and Sullivan’s (1986: 18, 20) classification of the assemblage, Nayombolmi painted 42 different subjects. His favourite motifs were anthropomorphous beings and fish, followed by other animals and material culture (Table 2). Later research has added many rock art images from different sites (e.g. Taçon 1989; Chaloupka 1993; Taçon and Chippindale 2001; May et al. 2019; Goldhahn et al. 2020, Goldhahn et al. 2021b, see Figs 1 and 4 for two examples). Today, we know of more than 800 figures created by Nayombolmi.

Spearing in Oenpelli 1926

During one of his visits to Oenpelli, Nayombolmi was speared. He was accused of ‘wangbol business’ (Chaloupka et al. 1985: 128), i.e. killing somebody by sorcery, and challenged in a ritualised duel. There is contradicting information about when this happened. In an interview in the 1980s, Namingum stated it

Subject matter	Number	%
Fish	215	35.6
Archer fish	2	
Barramundi	63	
Catfish	26	
Eel-tailed catfish	30	
Freshwater fish	2	
Long Tom	5	
Mullet	4	
Saratoga	7	
Unidentified	76	
People	193	32
Female	141	
Male	36	
Unidentified	16	
Animals	70	11.5
Bird	8	
Echidna	3	
Flying fox	12	
Freshwater crocodile	3	
Goanna	6	
Goat	1	
Macropod	14	
Snake	7	
Turtle	13	
Water buffalo	1	
Unidentified	2	
Material Culture	65	10.7
Boomerang	2	
Didgeridoo	1	
Digging stick	1	
Dilly bag	22	
Gun (rifle)	1	
Goose wing fan	4	
Net	1	
Spear	25	
Spear thrower	8	
Plants	26	4.5
Mythology	24	4.0
Sorcery figure female	1	
Lightning Man	7	
Hermaphrodite	2	
Therianthropes	2	
Mythological other	12	
Other	11	1.7
Total	406	100

Table 2. Number and percentage of painted subjects by Nayombolmi. Source: Haskovec and Sullivan 1986.

happened 'during Paddy Cahill's time' (Chaloupka et al. 1985: 128), which implies it would have happened between 1910 and 1922 (e.g. Mulvaney 2004; May et al. 2020). Other sources indicate it happened after their brother was put in the school, which was established by the Church Missionary Society in 1925 (cf. Chaloupka 1981, 1983). Interestingly, in one of the letters that the missionary reverend Alf Dyer sent to their home church in Sydney, we find a colourful, but also an explicitly prejudiced, account of a spearing incident in 1926 in Oenpelli. It is worth quoting in full:

On September 28th the hosts of darkness seemed to have their fling. The boys cut their way through the mosquito wire & the girls also. Most of my morning went finding the offenders & laying on, some of the fathers helped in the punishment. Then the chief boy asked me to arbitrate, an impending fight over some trouble with the police boys & a lubra. However this trouble was overshadowed by a real fight. A new party arrived from beyond the head of the Alligator River toward Pine Creek, they rushed on to Dead Calf field in view of the house & the fight began before we knew. Some of our boys tried to stop them, but the fight went on, when we men folk go[t] there one man on each side was laid out. One with a spear through his arm & into his body below the ribs. The other into his back & probably hit the floating rib. He was the man they were after they blame him for a murder. The first man had one dressing on & has not troubled Mrs Thorne since, the other is a faintheart & will have to be pushed off his bed. It is very funny to see him held up by his youngest wife back to back, he will get his move on in a few days, he is the laziest black I have struck (Dyer 1926; May et al. 2020: 92-93).

A photograph in the Church Missionary Society collection of a wounded Aboriginal man painted up for a ritualised duel may depict this event (Fig. 7). The man in the photo resembles some of the earliest depictions of Nayombolmi, taken in 1929/1930 by the famous adventurer Francis Birtles (Goldhahn et al. 2021b). Josie Maralngurra, who knew Nayombolmi well, also confirmed that it is most likely him when he was 'a young man' (pers. comm. 18 July 2019).

Digging for gold and painting a car

During one of their regular walks in the early 1920s, the Badmardi encountered a group of gold miners at Imarlkba, situated in Jurkmanj clan Country at an upstream tributary of Barramundie Creek (see Goldhahn et al. 2021b). Among them was Yorky Mick Alderson, a famous Yorkshireman and fossicking entrepreneur in western Arnhem Land (Gillespie 1985, see also Levitus 1982, 1995). Imarlkba was a well-known place for the Badmardi as it was home to a ceremonial ground (Chaloupka et al. 1985: 86). The Badmardi interaction with the miners was casual to begin with. The Badmardi men used to kill water buffalo for the miners (Namingum 1985: 41), most likely to be able to trade the desired fresh meat for tobacco — or *nikki-nikki* as they called it (Gibirrigi 1985: 2).

Kapirigi, who was born in 1910, was about ten to twelve years old when he first encountered the miners. Before too long he found himself working at the Imarlkba mine alongside several of his clan members (Gillespie 1985). This usually took place on a seasonal basis, mainly in the dry season. Nayombolmi worked in the so-called 'boiling process', melting the alluvial deposit into gold bullion. As Namingum states, 'Charlie and his mate melted the gold and made it into large blocks. Lots of money' (Chaloupka et al. 1985: 86). Kapirigi worked in the battery while Namingum (1985: 25), when he was old enough, mainly worked in different shafts and costeans, collecting the ore with a pick and shovel: 'no grader, no bulldozer — we just [used] the pick and shovel' (Namingum 1985: 3).



Figure 7. Nipper Marakarra Gumurdul standing behind seated and speared man identified as Nayombolmi. Frank' Naluwud' Gurrabul on crutches (Northern Territory Archives Service NTRS 694 P1 Box 4b Item 276).

In the wet season of 1929 and 1930, the famous explorer and adventurer Francis Birtles roamed western Arnhem Land, prospecting for gold, until he found Imarlkba. According to his biography, Birtles (1935) spent much time alone in the bush, suffering in the humid and hot climate. His food supply went dry, and Birtles survived for weeks on boiled palm roots:

I worked there during the whole of the wet season, from October to April. From a party of blacks, traveling through that part of the country, I obtained some tea, giving them some tobacco in exchange. It was a lonely camp. The country carried no game, with the result that there were no natives camped in the vicinity. The little tribe, passing through on a pilgrimage from one hunting-ground to another, were the only human beings I saw during the months I was there (Birtles 1935: 283).

The pilgrims in the quote can be identified as the Badmardi (Goldhahn et al. 2021b). The reason for this is a captivating photograph of Birtles from his stay at Imarlkba when he is sitting in his decorated Bean Car with his dog Yowie (Clarsen 2017; Taçon 2019b), holding a (live) magpie goose in his lap (Fig. 8).

The car is decorated with twenty

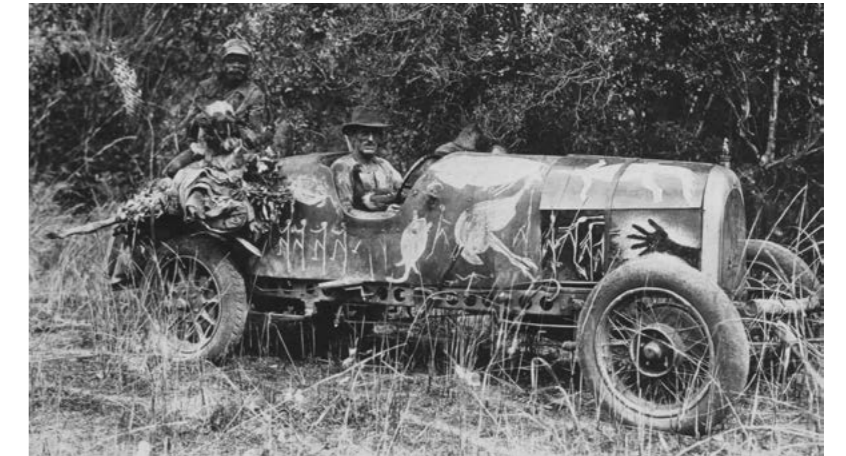


Figure 8. 'Mr. Francis Birtles in the car in which he made his last visit to Arnhem Land. The crude design on the body were drawn by aboriginals' [sic]. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the National Library of Australia, PIC/8381/1-423 LOC Album 1054/A-1054/D.

visually discernible painted images resembling traditional Aboriginal rock paintings, depicting an emu, a freshwater crocodile, two long-necked turtles, a saratoga, a hand-and-arm stencil, and fourteen dancing anthropomorphous figures (Fig. 8). Behind Birtles, we see an Aboriginal man sitting on a dead kangaroo holding a dog on his lap. Through oral histories with Namingum, undertaken in the early 1980s by Dan Gillespie (1985), the Aboriginal man sitting behind Birtles has been identified as Nayombolmi. He was also acknowledged as the artist who painted Birtles' Bean Car (Goldhahn et al. 2021b).

The buffalo years

From oral history, we know that Nayombolmi was involved in buffalo shooting in western Arnhem Land (see Feakins 2019; May et al. 2021c). This is said to have started sometime after the Great War when Nayombolmi was about twenty years old. Tom Cole, Paul Barnes and Jack Sargaent are some of the shooters that he worked with, according to Haskovec and Sullivan (1986: 6). That said, Nayombolmi is seldom mentioned in the historical sources concerning buffalo shooting (cf. Cole 1988, 1992). We also know that he worked with Keith Waldock, the leaseholder of the Barramundie Station between 1951-1958 (Feakins 2019: 22), and his partner Bob Cole shooting buffaloes in the Balawurru and South Alligator River area in the 1950s (cf. Haskovec and Sullivan 1986: 6; Levitus 2011: 34). Nayombolmi mainly worked as a skinner as well as washing, salting and drying the hides. His wife Rosie worked as a cook. Kapirigi acted as the mailman, bringing news and letters between the buffalo camp in Balawurru and Waldock's Aboriginal wife Doreen Cahill back at the station (Levitus 2011: 34).

Usually, this kind of work was a part-time, seasonal job; it started just after the wet season and lasted to the end of the dry. There is a beeswax rock art figure made by Nayombolmi commemorating his experience working with the buffalo shooters, depicting a seemingly agitated man confronting a buffalo with a rifle and a skinner knife (see Brady et al. 2020 for a photo and interpretation). This scene and a goat Najombolmi painted elsewhere (Haskovec and Sullivan 1986: 80) are the only two instances where Nayombolmi painted introduced subject matter (Table 2).

When Nayombolmi was not engaged in shooting buffalo, he usually went back to his traditional lifestyle, hunting, gathering, visiting family and friends, taking care of Country, and creating rock art



Figure 9. Nym Djimongurr dancing at Anlarr; in the background we see Nayombolmi wearing red shorts and a hat (photo by Valeri Lhuede in September 1963, published with her kind permission).

and bark paintings. When an opportunity arose, he also worked for periods of time with dingo scalpers, crocodile hunters and at Russ Jones' timber camp at Anlarr during the 1950s (Levitus 2011: 34). As a rule, his payment at these engagements usually consisted of food and tobacco, sometimes also a swag, shoes, clothes, mosquito nets and, occasionally, alcohol.

Tourism

In 1958, Alan Stewart (1969, 1985) bought Russ Jones' timber camp at Anlarr and transformed it into the first commercial safari camp in western Arnhem Land. Besides hunting, fishing and experiencing the astonishing birdlife, visitors had the chance to learn about traditional Aboriginal life, buy artworks and visit rock art sites in the vicinity. Sometimes Nayombolmi guided them to rockshelters in which he himself had created rock art, though he did not advertise this fact (e.g. Lhuede 2012; May et al. 2019). Among the visitors, we find world-famous naturalist David Attenborough (1963). Visitors were also entertained with songs and dances in the camp (Fig. 9):

... the way of life of our Aborigines. My Mailli [Aboriginal workers] were greatly interested in them too, and spent many hours with the guests explaining to them their tribal markings, bark paintings, and demonstrating their weapons and hunting skill. Kindly guests still send them Christmas cards, and colour pictures taken at Nourlangie (Stewart 1969: 19).

Nayombolmi and his wives became part of Stewart's workforce, and they appear in advertising materials, including some short movies that Stewart produced to attract new customers or that were filmed in the area in the late 1950s and early 1960 (e.g. Stewart 1969, n.d.; Henri and Ogg n.d., among others). Visitors at other safari camps, in what is now Kakadu, in the late 1950s and early 1960s also captured Nayombolmi and his closest kin in photographs, which have enabled us to put a face to the artworks he created (Fig. 1).

Sometime in the mid to late 1950s, Nayombolmi's older wife Nelly was bitten by a deaf adder snake while they were camped at Anlarr and passed away. After that, following local customs, he and his younger wife Rosie moved away from the camp for a while (Stewart 1985). In the early 1960s, he often camped at Muirella Park, another safari camp operated by Frank Muir. Here Nayombolmi helped build an airstrip, constructed houses, and guided and entertained the visitors. He was renowned for his fishing skills, which are rumoured to be the source of his nickname 'Bar-

ramundi Charlie' (e.g. Haskovec and Sullivan 1986, 1989). However, it seems just as likely that he earned his nickname from his time working for Waldock at Barramundie station (non-Aboriginal 'bosses' often gave such names to Aboriginal workers rather than learning to pronounce their true names).

Collecting and exhibiting bark art

With the growing number of cattle stations, safari and tourist camps in the Kakadu area in the 1950s and 1960s (see Opitz 2009), the region became a hot spot for art collectors. The most crucial ones for Nayombolmi were Dorothy Bennett (1914–2003) and her son Lance Bennett (1938–2013) (Goon 1996; Goldhahn et al. in press). The Bennetts collected many paintings by Nayombolmi that were later sold to private collectors or used in the Aboriginal art exhibitions they curated. The most important of these was a travelling exhibition in Japan, *Oosutoraria mikai bijutsu – Art of the Dreamtime*, held between May 1965 and January 1966 in major cities, such as Tokyo, Osaka and Yokohama (Fig. 10). It included five paintings by Nayombolmi (Bennett 1969). These paintings have ended up in the Australian National Museum in Canberra as part of the Dorothy Bennett Collection. One of these, the bark painting to the right in Figure 10 entitled 'Namorroddo, Malicious Spirit of the Stone Country', was included in the exhibition *Old Masters: Australia's great bark artists'*

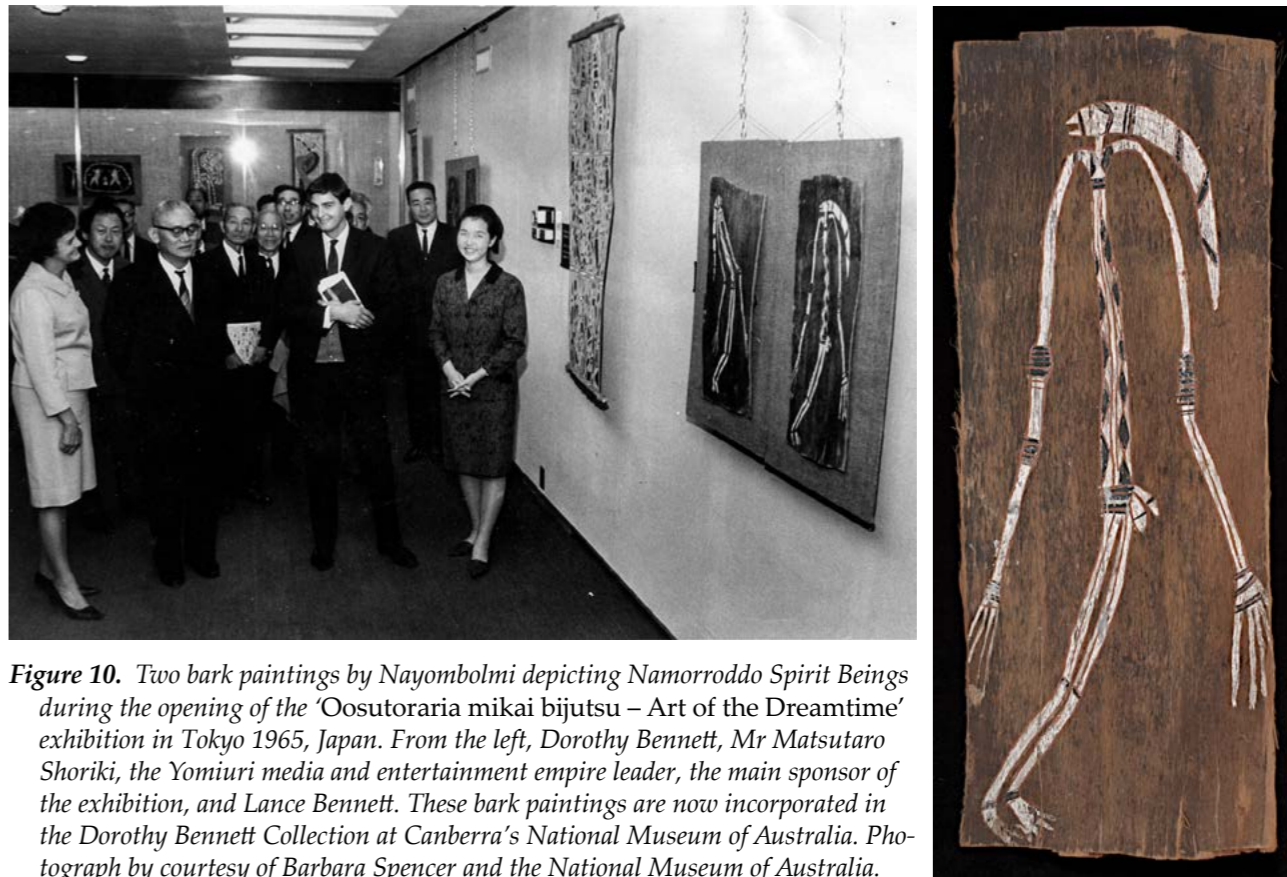


Figure 10. Two bark paintings by Nayombolmi depicting Namorroddo Spirit Beings during the opening of the 'Oosutoraria mikai bijutsu – Art of the Dreamtime' exhibition in Tokyo 1965, Japan. From the left, Dorothy Bennett, Mr Matsutaro Shoriki, the Yomiuri media and entertainment empire leader, the main sponsor of the exhibition, and Lance Bennett. These bark paintings are now incorporated in the Dorothy Bennett Collection at Canberra's National Museum of Australia. Photograph by courtesy of Barbara Spencer and the National Museum of Australia.

in 2013–2014 (Simpkin and Molony 2013, see also White 2020: 21). In 1966, Lance collected more paintings by Nayombolmi that, after he passed away, were sold by Dorothy's family through international auction houses (e.g. Sotheby's 2015).

The masterpiece — the Anbangbang gallery

Nayombolmi created some of his rock art masterpieces during his final years. This includes the famous Blue Painting site (Jalandoni and May 2020) and Anbangbang Gallery in the Burrungkuy area of Kakadu (Fig. 11). The latter was made together with



Figure 11. Anbangbang Gallery in 1986 (photo by Göran Burenhult, published with his kind permission).

one of Nayombolmi's contemporary artists and friend Djimongurr (May et al. 2019). Here they created an extraordinary scene with eleven anthropomorphic beings (three men and eight women), who are all decorated with intricate body art known to be used in important local ceremonies; three saratoga fish; and four Ancestral Beings known to have been responsible for crucial events that took place in and around the area (see Chaloupka 1982, 1993). These images were partly retouched and partly created during a week-long camping trip with their families during the wet season of 1963/1964. Djimongurr's daughter Josie Maralngurra assisted them by bringing food and water, mixing ochre with water and orchid bulbs, known as a 'bush glue,' *djalamardi*, which they used as a binder (see May et al. 2019 for a fuller account of the creation of these paintings).

Art as a teaching tool for the next generation — Nanguluwurr

Another of Nayombolmi and Djimongurr's camping trips in the wet season of 1963/1964 involved a visit to Nanguluwurr, situated c. 2.5 km north of the Anbangbang Gallery (Figure 5). This time they stayed for about three days with their families. As was the case at Anbangbang, Josie assisted the artists by bringing food and water while they were creating rock paintings. Djimongurr painted at least seven fish and a long-neck turtle (see Chaloupka 1982: 27–30; Haskovec and Sullivan 1986; Taçon 1989: 49), as well as a stencil of his daughter's arm and hand infilled with painted designs during this trip (May et al. 2020; Hayward et al. 2021). Nayombolmi also created several images at Nanguluwurr, among them a depiction of a Namor-rorddo Spirit-Being (Fig. 4). Telling stories, gesturing, chanting, singing and painting, like his father before him, he used the opportunity to re-tell some educational cultural stories, but this time Nayombolmi was the teacher, and Josie the young student (May and Goldhahn 2020; Goldhahn et al. 2020).

Final years at Mudginberri

Nayombolmi and his wife Rosie spent their final years at Mudginberri Station, situated c. 9 km north of today's Jabiru township (Figure 5). They moved there in the mid-1960s and stayed with Jimmy Wok Wok and his family. Wok Wok, who called Nayombolmi uncle according to the local kinship system, did not remember Nayombolmi painting any rock art sites during his last years (Haskovec and Sullivan 1986: 9). However, we know that he created several bark paintings, some of which were collected by Dorothy and Lance Bennett (e.g. Sotheby's 2015; Goldhahn and May 2020). The latter visited Mudginberri in the dry season of 1966. Nayombolmi's wife Rosie passed away later that year around Christmas time, a loss that had a severe impact on Nayombolmi, according to Lance (Sotheby's 2015). Less than a year later, on 14 August 1967, Nayombolmi passed away.

Nayombolmi's legacy

We contend that Nayombolmi is likely to be the most prolific known rock art artist in the world (cf. Goldhahn et al. 2021c). Through his significant style, his artworks are also among the most recognisable rock art globally and are often mentioned in global rock art overviews (e.g. Clottes 2002). The famous Anbangbang Gallery has contributed to his fame. This is the only rock art site in Kakadu open to visitors all year round. In 1990, it was estimated that over 238 000 people visited Kakadu, and of these, 86% visited Burrunguy and the Anbangbang Gallery (Sullivan 1995: 82). As Taçon and Chippindale (2001) have revealed, this has led to Nayombolmi's artworks being well-known in other media, but the artist himself was often left out of the story. For example, both the Coat of Arms of the Northern Territory and the logo of the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority in the Northern Territory were inspired by Nayombolmi's artworks. One of his paintings from Yuwunggayai even ended up on the bicentennial commemorative AUD10 note in 1988 (Taçon and Chippindale 2001; Goldhahn et al. 2021b).

As was revealed through the painting episodes at Anbangbang Gallery and Nanguluwurr, Nayombolmi and his contemporary artists often used their artworks as educational tools, unfolding their cultural knowledge about the First People (Goldhahn et al. 2020, see Taylor 1996; May 2006, 2008). The same artworks could be used to inform non-Aboriginal people about the culture and power of Aboriginal life-worlds (e.g. Berndt 1983; Morphy 2007). Moreover, through the work of art collectors such as the Bennetts, rock art researchers such as Chaloupka, Haskovec, Sullivan and Taçon, and the many relatives and friends of the artist who shared stories about his life, Nayombolmi's knowledge and artistic skills continue to educate outsiders about Aboriginal life and art in western Arnhem Land; a process that continues this very day (May et al. 2019; May et al. 2020; Goldhahn et al. 2020).

Recently there has been a growing interest in Nayombolmi's artistry. Many stories still flourish about him among local Aboriginal people, his family and kin, and Nayombolmi's artworks are a constant inspiration for present and emerging artists in western Arnhem Land. This, and much more, not least the beauty and artistic skill in his artworks, ensures that stories about Nayombolmi will prevail.

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