



The last rock painters of Kakadu revisited: The work of David Canari

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Abstract. In 1985, I recorded Aboriginal Traditional Owner David Canari making a rock painting of a black bream fish in a small rock shelter in central Kakadu National Park, Northern Territory, Australia that became the focus of a paper published in The Australian Museum's science magazine *Australian Natural History* in 1992. Between 1985 and 1995 David showed me other rock paintings he made from the 1960s to the mid-1980s while we undertook collaborative research on Kakadu-Arnhem Land rock art. Together, we visited hundreds of rock art sites across the Kakadu region, often with other Aboriginal Traditional Owners, other rock art experts and students. David continued painting on portable media, such as sheets of bark and wooden didgeridoos, during this period, and numerous ethnographic interviews about rock art were recorded. David also assisted many others with research, including archaeologists Rhys Jones and Mike Smith, along with geomorphologist and OSL dating expert Richard (Bert) Roberts, to obtain the first early OSL dates from what is argued to be one of Australia's oldest sites, Nauwalabila, in Deaf Adder Gorge. In this paper some of David's artwork is explored along with his profound insights into rock art production, significance and meaning to highlight the key contribution David made that advanced both Australian and global rock art research.

Keywords: Kakadu, David Canari, rock painting, bark painting, Northern Territory

Introduction and David's life history

Across the world there are many hundreds of thousands of rock art sites and millions of pictographs and petroglyphs. However, it is extremely rare to be able to put artist names to particular images. Fortunately, in the western Arnhem Land region of Australia's Northern Territory (Figure 1), which includes Kakadu National Park, we can associate particular rock paintings and some hand stencils with a growing number of Aboriginal rock painters and their relatives. For instance, prolific rock painter Nayombolmi has long been known for his work (Chaloupka 1982; Goldhahn et al. in press; Goldhahn et al. 2022; Haskovec and Sullivan 1989; Taçon 1989b; Taçon and Chippindale 2001). New research on paintings by Nayombolmi and his close friend Djimongurr (Old Nym) has also been undertaken (May et al. 2019, 2020), as well as on lesser-known artists such as Billy Mirargu (Goldhahn et al. 2021), Majumbu (Taçon et al. 2023), Narlim (May et al. 2021b; Rademaker et al. 2024) and Quilp (May et al. 2021a; Rademaker et al. 2024). In this paper, the focus is on David Canari, who made several rock paintings from the 1960s to the mid-1980s and worked with rock art researchers, excavation archaeologists, ethnomusicologists and linguists. He also featured in an article called *The last*

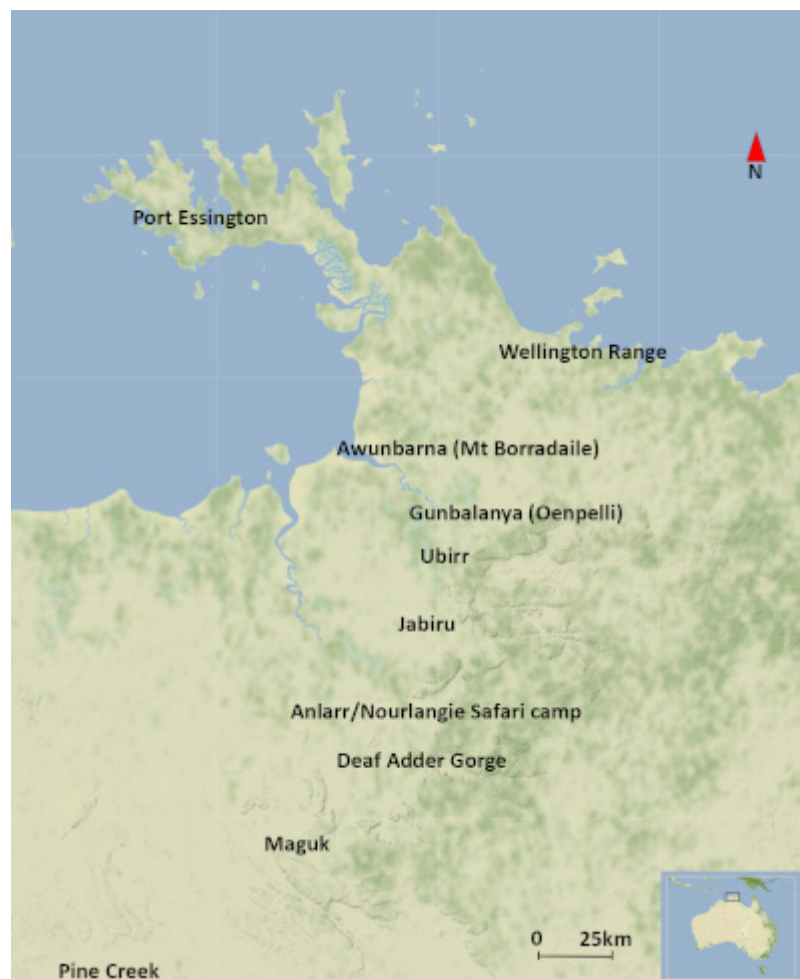


Figure 1. Western Arnhem Land with key places mentioned in the text and other important localities indicated (Map by Emily Miller and Paul S.C. Taçon).



Figure 2. David Canari drawing a crocodile and with his painting of the head and shoulders of an Aboriginal man that is possibly a self-portrait, Oenpelli, March 1969 (Photo: Courtesy of the Church Missionary Society).

rock painters of Kakadu (Taçon 1992b).

After David Canari was born in 1938, he was sometimes called Nadulwinj (Chaloupka et al. 1985: 177) but was more often referred to as David Malei-buma (also spelled Malaibuma). At some point in the late 1960s, he began to be known as David Canari and his use of the Aboriginal name Malei-buma ceased. This causes some confusion when searching archives. However, in a Church Missionary Society list of Oenpelli surnames, missionary Alf Wilson (1971: 14) listed David as 'David Maleibuma Canari'. There also was a well-known central Arnhem Land bark painter by the name of David Milaybuma (1938-1983) which further complicates archival record searches.

From the late 1960s, David's surname was sometimes spelt Canarri, Ganari, Gannari, Ganarri, Gunari, Kanari or Kamari. For instance, Keen (1980: 196) and Evans (1992: 502, 2002, 2003: xxiv) referred to David as 'David Kanari' while Haskovec and Sullivan (1986, 1989) and Sullivan and Haskovec (1986) called him 'David Gannari'. Roberts et al. (1994: 582) refer to him as 'David Ganari', although the photos associated with their collaborative research with David that Mike Smith deposited at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) in Canberra say 'David Canari'. The coroner's report into his death in 1997 lists him as 'David Canarri'.

Significantly, David usually signed his surname as either 'Canari' or 'Canarri'.

He was a Badmardi clan member of the Yirritja moiety born on 2nd February 1938 according to a Northern Territory Coroner's report (NTRS2624, item D0093/1997, Coroners No. 9715019) in or near the Deaf Adder Gorge region of what is now Kakadu National Park, Northern Territory. His mother was Gulem (Old Rosie; Rosie Algunaubidj) 'of the Djawonji Bedberd clan' (Jawoyn-speaking Berdberd clan) and Dhuwa moiety, while his father was Badmardi elder Nagulidj (Chaloupka et al. 1985: 177). George Namingum was David's full brother, while Nipper Kaporigi, the son of Nagulidj's first wife, was a half-brother to both. David spent his early years around Oenpelli (Gunbalanya) and Beswick to the south with his mother and her new husband, Charlie Nayondorr, a Kunwinjku man she partnered with after David's father's death, just before David was born.

When David was very young, he also spent time with his Badmardi relatives and his grandfather taught him about kangaroo and wallaby tracks by drawing them on the ground with his fingers and later taught him to hunt, as did an uncle, George Nagarunga (Taçon 1986b: 111-112). David also learnt about Dreamtime stories and rock painting from them, as well as 'a little bit' from his cousin Nayombolmi (Taçon 1986b: 113) and his mother, who learned Dreamtime stories from her father and mother (Taçon 1986c: 90).

David contracted leprosy early in life and at the age of 11 was sent from Beswick Station, where his mother was camped with relatives, to the Channel Island leprosarium in Darwin sometime between 12th April 1949 and 8th August 1949 (Sweeny 1949). Many records show he was there until the Channel Island leprosarium closed in 1955, when patients were transferred to the new East Arm leprosarium, beginning on 1st August. David was at the East Arm leprosarium until 13th August 1957 when he was discharged to Oenpelli (Giese 1957; Mocatta 1957) after an initial recommendation of discharge on 19th December 1956 (Mocatta 1956).

David first made a hand stencil (what he termed 'fingerprints') when he was about 15 years old (Taçon 1986b: 113), and he played the didgeridoo from the age of 12 (Anon 1987: 10; Taçon tape 04, 20:02, 7th September 1986), learning both from relatives while at a leprosarium in Darwin. At Oenpelli, after he was discharged from the leprosarium in Darwin, he became interested in painting and initially tried to paint on his own (Figure 2). Then he learned from several people at Oenpelli (Taçon 1989b: 97).

While at Oenpelli in mid-1962, ethnomusicologist Alice Moyle recorded songs that were accompanied by didgeridoo players. Some were later included in a collection of recordings made at several communities and later sold as a CD called 'Songs from the Northern Territory 1: Music from western Arnhem Land'. One song, Djunggurin, was sung by rock and bark painter



Figure 3. David Canari in September 1985 next to one of his 1960s fish paintings (hairback herring; *Nabard-barde*; *Nematolosa erebi*), to the left of his cap, Ubirr main gallery, Kakadu National Park (Photo: Paul S.C. Taçon).

Lofty Bardayal Nadjamerrek with David 'Malalaibuma' playing the didgeridoo. In another, 'Wild Onion Corroboree', David played the didgeridoo for Old Nym Djimongurr, who danced and sang the song with Fred Namandjalawogwog. Some of the photographs Moyle took while the songs were sung are at AIATSIS in Canberra. 'David Malaibuma, alias McKenaie' is said to be playing the didgeridoo in three photographs, and it certainly looks like David Canari in them rather than Kuninjku artist David Milaybuma, who was living and painting at Maningrida rather than Oenpelli in the early 1960s (Taylor 1987: 131).

Later, David spent time in various parts of what is now Kakadu National Park. In the dry season he would camp at Merl, Binjdjarrang, Malangangarr, near the Border Store for supplies, as well as the Ubirr rock art complex and the East Alligator River for hunting. He also sometimes worked and stayed at Alan Stewart's Nourlangie safari camp (Alligator Stage II Land Claim 1980: 518; later named Anlarr). The safari camp



Figure 4. David's 1960s rock painting of a mullet (*Matjabarr*; *Liza* spp.) at Ubirr (Photo: Paul S.C. Taçon).

operated from 1959 to the early 1970s (May et al. 2024; Stewart 1969). During the 1960s and 1970s he made rock paintings of fish at Ubirr, including a hairback herring, mullet and archer fish (Figures 3–5).

He also painted a white mullet a few kilometres south of Ubirr, at Malangangarr, and signed his name as 'David' below the fish in red paint (Figure 6). At one

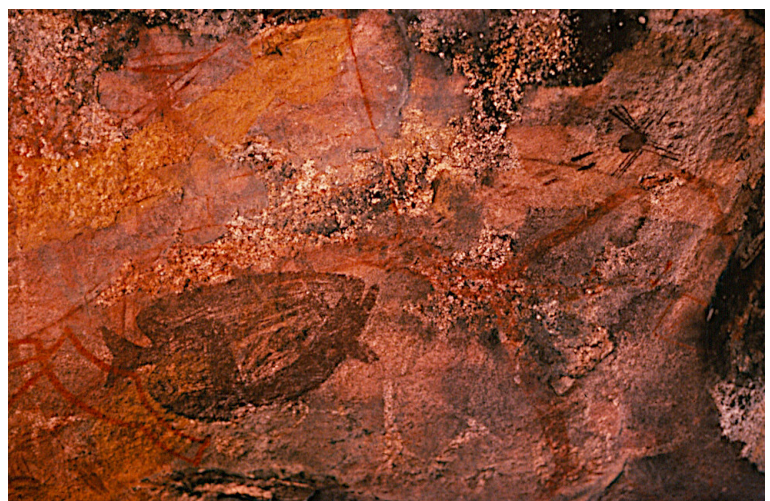


Figure 5. David painted an X-ray archer fish shooting a stream of water at a spider in one Ubirr gallery in the 1960s (Photo: Paul S.C. Taçon).



Figure 6. At a site near the East Alligator River south of Ubirr, David added his name below a white painting of a mullet he made (Photo: Paul S.C. Taçon).

site, he made a red rock painting of a human figure holding a three-pronged spear in a spear thrower above its head. To the left and below, he wrote 'By David Canarri' in red. Sometime later, he retouched 'David Canarri' in white, to the author's knowledge, the only known instance of a rock artist signing a work and later retouching his name in a different colour.

David had odd jobs off and on at the Nourlangie safari camp and then nearby wildlife sanctuaries for about five years, including clearing camps of leaves (Alligator Stage II Land Claim 1980: 519), and collectively referred to this employment as 'Wildlife'. It is relevant here that the Woolwonga Aboriginal Reserve near Nourlangie was 'redefined as a Wildlife Sanctuary in 1964' (Keen 1980: 50; and see Stewart 1969: 126), and in 1972 the Alligator Rivers Wildlife Sanctuary and Protected Areas were founded, with the Nourlangie safari camp closing down soon after. After that work ended, David would sometimes be employed to take people to Deaf Adder Gorge when his older

brother Nipper Kapiirigi was at Pine Creek (Alligator Stage II Land Claim 1980: 519). From the 1960s to the 1990s, David also supported himself by hand-carving birds from water buffalo horns, making and painting didgeridoos and sometimes making bark paintings to sell to passing tourists. One of these barks (Figure 7), complete with his signature, has several animals painted with what appears to be the same unusual creamy light pink colour used for his mullet rock painting at Ubirr (Figure 3), a colour not found at any other rock art site. In the 1960s, some of his bark paintings were sold at the Border Store near Ubirr, the Cooina pub and possibly at the Nourlangie safari camp. He also worked a lot with solo tour operator Duncan MacRae in the 1980s and 1990s and later delighted in telling stories about their adventures and mishaps. In 1989, David was an integral part of the short-lived tour company Northern Adventure Safaris formed by MacRae and Chris Draffin (Campbell 1989: 20).

In the 1970s, David was spending more time with his older brothers. For instance, in August 1978, David and Nipper Kapiirigi 'sang a "Dead-Man" corroboree for their deceased father' at Jim Jim Crossing, emphasising their traditional connections to their Dreamings and Country (Keen 1980: 196). In August 1979, David was living at an outstation in Deaf Adder Gorge with his two brothers, Nipper Kapiirigi and George Namingum, along with nine other relatives. 'As the wet season drew near towards the end of 1979, most of the residents of Deaf Adder outstation moved to Muirella Park and set up camp there (Keen 1980: 218-219).

David's first partner was Thelma Galarrma (sometimes referred to as Alarrma and born 1st June 1948). They got together in the mid-1960s and had a daughter, Rosea (Rosa in some records) Mardjarlung, born at Cahills Crossing, East Alligator River on 6th November 1966. They stayed at various camps and



Figure 7. Bark painting by David Canari with a goanna, macropod, snake, sugar glider and echidna.



Figure 8. (a) Kakadu National Park rock art conservation test site with paintings by David made in 1985; (b) David's 1985 rock painting of a woman with an 8 cm scale (Photo: Paul S.C. Taçon).

on 1st July 1967 were at Frank Nalowed's camp near Oenpelli (Mackett 2017). Rosea passed away on 1st January 1969 in a tragic accident while playing with other children. David blamed his wife and left her soon after (Taçon 1985c: 82). He took a second wife, Mary Algurbarara, in the early 1980s, but she passed away at the beginning of July 1986 (Taçon 1986/87a: 267). David had a third wife, Rosie Yarrowai Nabobbob, from early 1993 (Taçon 1993: 62) until he died of natural causes in the Royal Darwin Hospital on 28th June 1997. They first met at the East Arm leprosarium in the early 1950s and were discharged together to Oenpelli in 1957.

When I first met David, on the 19th July 1985, he was living at an outstation known as Patonga Airstrip, not far from the tourist hub of Cooida, engaged in lots of artmaking, especially bark paintings and painted didgeridoos. For instance, on 3rd August 1985, David showed me some of his bark paintings for sale in the Cooida restaurant (Taçon 1985a: 142). At that time, he claimed to have been born in 1948 (Anon 1987: 10; Taçon 1986b: 112), so people would think he was 10 years younger than he actually was. It was his half-brother, Nipper Kapriigi, who introduced me to David, telling me that we should work together if I wanted to better understand the rock art of western Arnhem Land.

Over the next eleven years that we collaborated, I found him camping at over a dozen different outstations and bush camps throughout Kakadu, from Mudginberri in the north to Paradise (Patonga) and Spring Peak in the south. Sometimes he would stay at Gunbalanya (Oenpelli) in Arnhem Land, where he would paint with friends and occasionally visit nearby rock art sites at Injalak Hill and elsewhere.

Work with academics in the 1980s and 1990s

In the mid to late 1980s, David worked with linguist Nicholas Evans and others to record the Mayali language (e.g. Evans 1992, 2003). He also worked with

Kakadu National Park-based archaeologists Hilary Sullivan and Ivan Haskovec. They recorded information about paint preparation and traditional methods of painting from David and his then wife Mary in June 1985 (Sullivan and Haskovec 1986: 5). He also gave them information about rock artist Nayombolmi (Haskovec and Sullivan 1986; 1989: 73). Later in 1985, Sullivan and Haskovec (1986:21) undertook experimental rock art conservation work with David:

We have tried two inorganic impregnating liquids, one of which (GOLIAH) tends to form a skin. The other, Wacker Stone Strengthener OH allows the water to permeate through. Wacker identifies this solution as 'pure silicic acid eaters', where ether, as a carrier of silicone dioxide allows the compound to penetrate the porous stratas and then evaporated. This compound was used to impregnate the paintings which were painted for the purpose by D. Gannari. He painted 72 circles comprised of 12 colours. Each colour was repeated six times. Some circles were impregnated with the above chemicals and some were left untouched. These are monitored to evaluate any changes and to assess the characteristics of individual chemicals.

The experimental work on the paintings also gave us an opportunity to collate information on the technical side of painting, e.g. selection of a suitable mineral, preparation of a paint, methods of paint application, etc.

David took me to the site (Figure 8a) a few weeks later and I noticed he also had painted a female figure in red-brown that looked like a Playboy centrefold and unlike the typical female human forms at other Kakadu sites (Figure 8b). When asked about the rock painting of the woman, he said it was done for fun while Haskovec and Sullivan were working. The site was revisited in 2018 and 2022 and remains important for rock art conservation research.

Taçon PhD Fieldwork (1985-1987)

My PhD fieldwork in Kakadu National Park took



Figure 9. David starting to paint his black bream at Maguk (Barramundi Gorge), and the finished fish (Photos: Paul S.C. Taçon).

place over 15 months between late June 1985 and late January 1987, with David accompanying me on various fieldtrips with other Traditional Owners and community members. On 13th September 1985, we met at Cooida, and he chose Maguk (then often referred to by its non-Aboriginal name Barramundi Gorge) for us to camp at when I offered to take him 'out scrub'. He told me he camped and fished at Maguk a lot when he was a little boy (Taçon 1985b: 91). But before

going there, he wanted to show me paintings he had made for Haskovec and Sullivan as well as some of the first rock paintings he made, in the 1960s at Ubirr when he was camping there. We visited those sites on the 18th September, and the next day drove to Maguk with Mary. On the 21st September, David made his black bream painting (Figure 9), the main subject of *The last rock painters of Kakadu* article (Taçon 1992b), with a black body, red outline and some yellow body features including an eye and mouth. When it was completed, he said he would not sign his name with the painting like he had done for some of his bark and rock paintings, 'that it was enough that I should know he had done it' (Taçon 1985b: 115). He also said that when returning to the area in 10, 20 or 30 years with a wife and children, long after he has died, I can look at the painting and say, 'my good friend David did this' and in that way will remember the good time the three of us had camping at Maguk. It was at that point that I realised how some rock paintings could be mnemonic devices for triggering memories of personal experiences, something important not only for my PhD thesis but also much of my rock art research since.

We returned to Maguk the following year on 12th August 1986 for a tape-recorded interview (Taçon 1986a). Among other things, David was the first person to tell me about spirit children resembling small fish living in water bodies (see also Taçon 1989a: 246). But when asked why there were so many paintings of fish at Kakadu rock art sites, he responded with 'Many fish because people been eating fish for many thousands of years' (Taçon 1986a, Side B). Thus, paintings of fish could have both secular and spiritual connotations. I have revisited the Maguk site several times with various people, most recently in October 2025, 40 years after David made his black bream, to monitor the painting's change over time and to share the story of how the painting came to be, each time saying, 'my good friend David did this'.

From the 7th to 15th September 1986, we undertook fieldwork in Deaf Adder Gorge with David's half-brother Nipper Kipirigi, Minnie Alderson, Minnie's best friend Topsy Namarrayalmak and Norman Ross, camping at Djuwarr, a favoured Badmardi location with lots of fish in the adjacent creek and

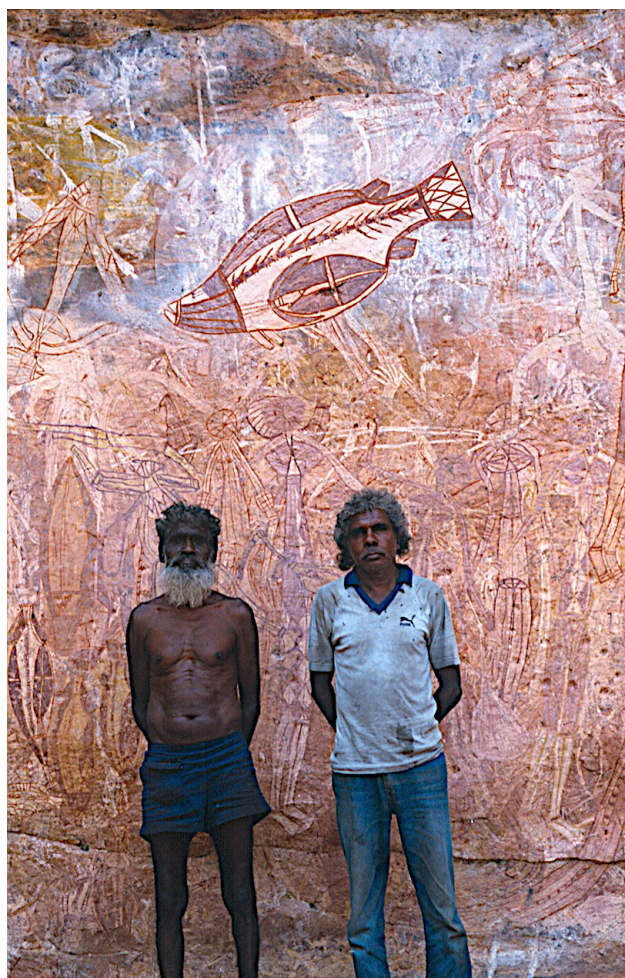


Figure 10. Nipper Kipirigi and David Canari below their father's painting of a barramundi at Yuwenjgayay rock shelter, Kakadu National Park in 1986 (Photo: Paul S.C. Taçon).



Figure 11. An archer fish David painted on a didgeridoo he made in 1985 (Photo: Paul S.C. Taçon).

nearby billabongs. Close by, there are also dozens of rock shelters with spectacular panels of rock paintings in all the western Arnhem Land styles and floors covered with cores, flakes and the occasional stone tool. Obviously, this had been a preferred camping location for thousands of years. A highlight was a day trip to the Yuwengayay rock shelter that has one of the most stunning panels of rock paintings in Kakadu National Park (Figure 10). At Yuwengayay, there is a painting of a pregnant woman with four small stick figure ‘babies’ inside her:

This led into a discussion about the origin of babies and spirit children. I asked Nipper where spirit children came from and without any prompting from David or myself he said that they lived in the water and were little fish! He also stated that these little fish were the spirit children of all animals and not just human beings! (Taçon 1986/87b: 132).

While at Yuwengayay, Nipper and David told me many traditional stories, including about the creation of the area, all of which were recorded on tape and were integral to my PhD thesis (Taçon 1989b). They also pointed out many paintings made by Nayombolmi, a life-size kangaroo made by an uncle, and a large, aesthetically powerful barramundi made by their father Nagulidj (Figure 10).

David gave me many insights about rock art when we worked together in 1985-1987, in particular:

- How rock paintings were made, especially from watching him make the black bream rock painting.
- Paintings of animals were often made after hunting rather than before, as a record of the catch rather than for hunting magic.
- Paintings were done at any time of the year and not just in the wet season.
- Fish are important to eat, think and paint.
- There is an important relationship between spirit children, fish and Yawk Yawk (mermaids) in the local cosmology because spirit children resemble small fish and live in water where some Yawk Yawk look after them. In some rock paintings, spirit children are portrayed as small stick figures on or in human bodies.
- The guts, lungs and other organs are not shown in paintings of human figures as they are with animals, because that would attract the malevolent spirit Namorrorddo (shooting star/white-bellied sea eagle), who likes to take these to eat from dying people.

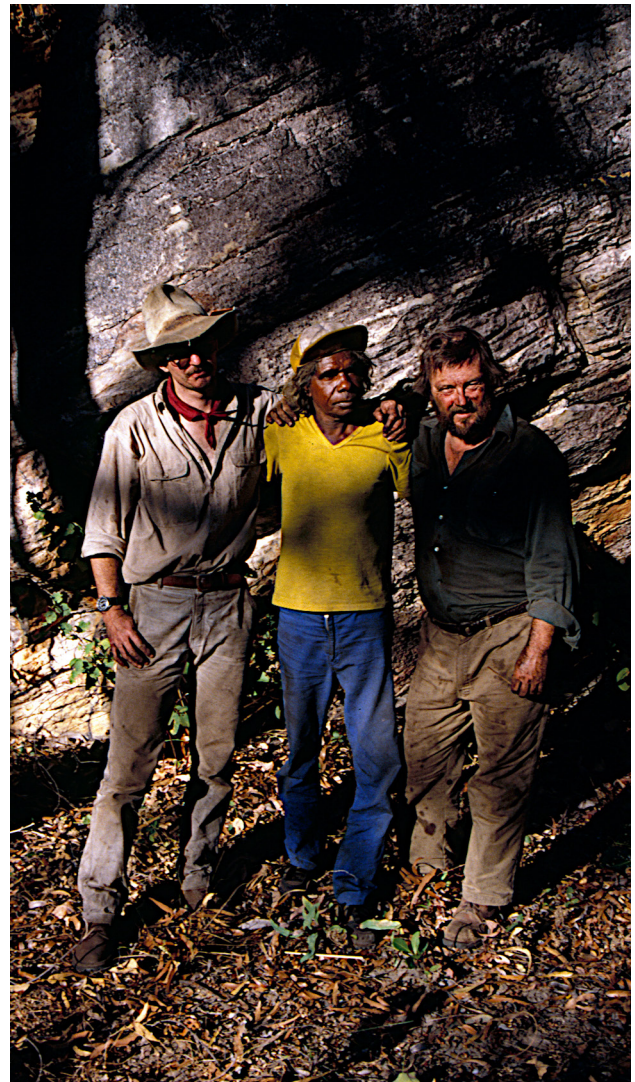


Figure 12. Mike Smith, David Canari and Rhys Jones at Nauwalabila in Deaf Adder Gorge, Kakadu National Park in July 1989 (Photo: Richard Roberts with Mike Smith's camera, courtesy of and with permission from Mike Smith, Richard Roberts and AIATSIS).

- The Ancestral creation woman put colour in fish and other creatures. Colour in the form of hatching in paintings of animals and humans shows they are alive.
- David is of the Yirritja moiety. Yirritja colours are yellow and white. Yirritja artists use large lines in paintings. Red and black are Dhuwa moiety colours and Dhuwa people painted with small lines. Yirritja and Dhuwa artists can paint both Yirritja and Dhuwa animal subject matter.
- Often, David's paintings feature white and/or yellow because he is Yirritja, but both black bream and archer fish are Dhuwa, and the actual fish is black, which is why David painted them black. David painted an archer fish at a site in the Ubirr complex (Figure 5), and on a didgeridoo he made in 1985 (Figure 11).

David Canari's fieldwork with archaeologists 1989-1995

In July 1989, David joined archaeologists Rhys Jones and Mike Smith (Figure 12), along with geomorphologist and OSL dating expert Richard (Bert) Roberts, to obtain the first early OSL dates from Nauwalabila in Deaf Adder Gorge, with the oldest occupation layers bracketed between 53 and 60 ka (Roberts et al. 1994: 582). At the same time, he taught people how to make didgeridoos, including Ianto Thornber (1989: 3), who went on to establish a didgeridoo manufacturing business in Leeds, United Kingdom.

From 1991 to 1995, David worked off and on with me and British archaeologist Christopher Chippindale. One of the first things we did was revisit David's Maguk painting twice, on 21st and 28th July 1991. We went over a draft of 'The last rock painters of Kakadu' and David was really pleased that an article about his work would be published in *Australian Natural History* (Taçon 1991: 106). The following year, on the 25th May, I gave David a copy of the now published article along with a royalty cheque. He was thrilled with both (Taçon 1992a: 19). Later, on 4th June 1992, Chippindale and I recorded a panel of Dynamic Figure style rock paintings at Nawurlandja, near the Burrungkuy (Nourlangie) art sites open to tourists (for part of it see Taçon and Chippindale 1994: 218 and 220). I interviewed David and tape-recorded his stories about the Mimih and other beings said to have made old rock art, including the Dynamic Figures we were studying at Nawurlandja and across western Arnhem Land (e.g. Chippindale et al. 2000; Figure 13). In late June, we flew by helicopter to Upper Deaf Adder Creek, above Mirbolol Falls, to record a couple of dozen more rock art sites with David.

In 1993, David was now with his third 'wife', Rosie. On the 2nd of June, Chris and I revisited David's paint-

ing at Maguk with both David and Rosie. We had three didgeridoos painted with plant and animal motifs David recently had made that we had purchased three days earlier. David played all of the didgeridoos and described the paintings on each (one had two snakes, two fish, a yam bulb with above-ground foliage and the bulb and foliage of a plant David called *angordjbang* that grows under water in creeks; the second had a rock python wound around it; the third had three Mimih spirits and a lizard). In 1994, David joined us for further rock art survey and recording in the Upper Twin Falls Creek with Festo Marranlgurra, Rosie's son. In 1995, David accompanied Chippindale and then Cambridge University PhD student Benjamin Smith to Djuwarr to record some rock art there. Then in late June and early July, David, Chris, and then Sydney University student Meredith Wilson and I recorded rock paintings at Mt Gilruth and on the Arnhem Land side of Deaf Adder Gorge, seeing amazing depictions of Rainbow Serpents and all manner of Dynamic Figures, including some life-size, in the process.

We had unexpected adventures on each trip from close encounters with buffaloes and snakes, to helicopters not showing up to pick us up as scheduled, to brief periods of one or more of us getting lost. But David was always cheery, and he gave us many insights during these trips. For instance, in 1994 when we found a rock art site with two paintings of Rainbow Serpents David 'immediately volunteered that two Yam Rainbow Serpents painted next to each other were of different genders, when we first came across the site: the Serpent with a pointed tail was female, that with a spiked tail was male' (Taçon et al. 1996: 112), something later confirmed with other artists and very important for our subsequent publication.



Figure 13. Paul S.C. Taçon interviewing David about rock art at Nawurlandja, Kakadu National Park in June 1992 (Photo: Paul S.C. Taçon).

Rock art and other art creation

David was keenly interested in his rock art heritage and enjoyed the opportunity to travel to remote rock art sites with researchers, sharing his traditional knowledge with them. Some places he had not been to since he was a boy or young adult, while others he had not been to before. Rock paintings were one of the inspirations for some of what he painted in other media. His painting skills developed from learning from local Bininj (Aboriginal) artists, but also Balanda (non-Aboriginal) ways of representation. This led to a mix of manners of depiction and eventually his own style that drew on the two traditions in different ways and to differing degrees for each painting event.

We know that David painted at no less than six rock art sites and made a charcoal drawing at another, as well as hand stencils elsewhere. Although David made artworks for many decades only 13 instances of rock art, five bark paintings, five didgeridoos, two works on paper, and one wall installation can be confirmed as David's today. He made and sold many other bark paintings and painted didgeridoos but their current whereabouts is unknown. One of the surviving bark paintings features land animals while a second is water-based with five fish and a Yawk Yawk, an Arnhem Land mermaid. Both are signed 'David Canarri' and date to the early 1960s. The other three, made in the 1980s, were inspired by a rock painting of a spirit being of various names painted in a rock shelter on Injalak Hill, close to Oenpelli (Gunbalanya) and a 1947 rendering made by bark painter Midjawmidjaw (in Berndt and Berndt 1982: opposite page 401; Elkin et al. 1950: cover). All three of the paintings are in the same style, and one has the artist listed as David Kanari.

The wall installation was made for the new Adjumarllarl Supermarket at Oenpelli (Gunbalanya) that opened in 1971. Missionary Alf Wilson (2005: 149)

later commented that the 'large black painted cut-outs that David Kanari had made stood out beautifully on the white peg board'. They were on three of the four walls above the shelves and consisted of silhouettes of a man holding a spear in a spear thrower, a woman on her knees holding a digging stick in front of her and wearing a twined dilly basket, water buffalo, kangaroo, a man sitting down holding a fish, a standing child facing away from the man and holding a fish in each hand and a woman sitting down facing the child with an outstretched arm reaching for one of the fish (Figure 14). The human figures are reminiscent of his rock painting of a woman made in 1986 (Figure 8b).

The known subject matter of David's artwork consists of human figures, spirit beings, two plant species and 11 species of animals (Table 1), not including birds he carved from water buffalo horn. The most common subject in David's paintings is fish, with 20 of the 52 paintings being fish, 38.4 per cent, and the only subject painted in every medium. This is more than for Nayombolmi, as 27.7 per cent of his paintings are of fish (Goldhahn et al. in press). The most frequent subject at recent rock art at sites across western Arnhem Land is also fish, accounting for 62.5% of a sample of 2979 x-ray paintings and 36.9 percent of a sample of 1633 solid/stroke infill rock paintings made in the past two thousand years (Taçon 1988: 5; 1989b: 146–148), indicating that both David and Nayombolmi followed a recent regional tradition of artists making lots of fish paintings.

David painted six species of fish at rock art sites and another on a didgeridoo. The fish rock paintings consist of three fork-tail catfish (*Almakkawarri*; *Hexanemachthys leptaspis*), two mullet (*Matjabarr*; *Liza spp.*), a barramundi (*Namarnkorl*; *Lates calcarifer*), a hairback herring (*Nabardebarde*; *Nematolosa erebi*), an archer fish (*Njarlkan*; *Toxotes caataraeus*) and a



Figure 14. The Adjumarllarl Supermarket in late November 1986 with some of David Canari's silhouette figures on one of the walls (Photo: Courtesy Cameron Plastow).

Subject/media	Rock painting/ drawing	Bark painting	Didgeridoo painting	Wall or paper art	Total
Fish	9	5	3	3	20
Human being	2	0	0	6	8
Snake	0	1	3	0	4
Mimi spirit	0	0	3	0	3
Aranga/Namarrgon (Lightning Man)	0	3	0	0	3
Yawk Yawk (mermaid)	0	1	0	0	1
Plant	0	0	2	0	2
Macropod	0	1	0	1	2
Goanna	0	1	1	0	2
Water buffalo	0	0	0	1	1
Crocodile	0	0	0	1	1
Lizard	0	0	1	0	1
Turtle	1	0	0	0	1
Echidna	0	1	0	0	1
Sugar glider	0	1	0	0	1
Spider	1	0	0	0	1
Total	13	14	13	12	52

Table 1. The painted subject matter of David Canari's known artworks.

black bream (Nakerdmi; *Hephaestus fuliginosus*). The fish painted on didgeridoos and a bark painting are an archer fish, a barramundi and two saratoga (Kuluybirr; *Scleropages jardini*). Nayombolmi painted 15 species of fish at rock art sites, the seven species David Canari painted as well as eight others (Goldhahn et al. in press). On one bark painting, there are four archer fish and a barramundi; an archer fish was also painted on a didgeridoo, but the wall art fish are of unknown species.

Most of the rock art David made (Table 1) was at known art sites, but the black bream he painted at Ma-

guk was in a small shelter that had not been previously used for rock art. However, the location of the site he chose is very significant in terms of the surrounding cultural landscape because David's painting of the black bream is close to the boundary of Gundjeibmi and Jawoyn land. David's mother was Jawoyn while his father was Gundjeibmi, David spent time camping and fishing at Maguk when he was a boy before being taken to the leprosarium, and Maguk was a place where we had an enjoyable time talking about rock art and fishing for black bream with his wife Mary in 1985. In several ways, the painting and the site chosen for it reflect many aspects of David's life up to when the black bream was depicted.

David made his last rock art on 13th July 1994, a portrait of then Northern Territory University student and field assistant Maya Vanags, at Upper Twin Falls Creek, Kakadu National Park (Figure 15). In 1995, David featured in a *Beyond 2000* science television episode shot in Deaf Adder Gorge on 19th August, after our fieldwork was profiled on the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper. He passed away on 28th June 1997 and was given a traditional funeral and secondary burial in Deaf Adder Gorge, just as was done for his brothers Nipper Kapirigi and George Namingum. But his artwork and contributions to rock art research live on.

Conclusion

David led an adventurous and eventful life with



Figure 15. David's 1994 charcoal drawing of Maya Vanags on rock at Upper Twin Falls Creek, Kakadu National Park (Photo: Paul S.C. Taçon).

family in the bush, eight years at two leprosariums in Darwin, many years at the Oenpelli mission, at numerous Bininj (Aboriginal) camps across western Arnhem Land and on research fieldtrips with academics. He made and painted hundreds of didgeridoos throughout his lifetime and some of his didgeridoo playing contributed to ethnomusicologist Alice Moyle's early 1960s study of Aboriginal songs across the Top End of the Northern Territory and can still be heard from commercially sold CDs today. David also made many bark paintings and, unlike most bark painters, signed his name on some of them.

He always had an interest in rock art and made some rock paintings himself from the 1960s to the 1980s. Most of his rock paintings are of fish and this was a frequent subject across all media he worked in. David's close working relationships with rock art researchers, including myself, from mid-1980 to mid-1990 was instrumental in advancing knowledge about the rock art of western Arnhem Land, with global ramifications. For instance, his knowledge and experience conveyed to rock art researchers helped dispel notions about animals depicted at rock art sites being used in hunting magic as fish and other creatures were usually painted after they were caught rather than before.

In the 1980s and 1990s few rock art researchers were undertaking research in western Arnhem Land, unlike since 2008 (Taçon 2022). If Nipper Kapirigi had not introduced me to David in 1985 and strongly suggested I work with him the black bream painting may not have been made and most of the rock paintings he made in the 1960s unknown. David contributed to many journal articles and book chapters on western Arnhem Land rock art, along with Nipper Kapirigi and other Traditional Owners. He came from a very talented family with many male relatives practising rock painting, the most prolific being Nayombolmi. His legacy lives on in many forms, including visually in rock shelters in important cultural landscapes. He was a very proud Badmardi man and, as noted above, wanted me to say 'my good friend David did this' when showing his paintings to others. Yes, my good friend David did this!

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