

IN 1986, WHILE documenting rock painting sites in Kakadu National Park, east of Darwin in northern Australia, I came upon a remarkable cave-like shelter within a large sandstone outlier. The outlier was sitting in the middle of a vast floodplain, separated from the nearby Arnhem Land plateau. Earlier in the day I had surveyed much of the area, noting the location of rock art and taking photographs as I went. Most of the panels of paintings were located in well-lit, exposed shelters, but this, the last site of the day, was very different. A broad opening quickly narrowed and it was dark inside. At the back of the shelter broken rock lay on the floor but when my eyes adjusted to the darkness I soon saw there was a passage that sloped up to the top of the outlier. A small circle of light was visible where a tunnel reached the top. To the left I saw a panel of rock paintings halfway up the wall, dominated by a large fish.

Normally I would quickly remove my pack, getting my camera and notebook out to start documenting the find, but something held me back. For some reason I froze just inside the entrance and could not bring myself to move forward. I stared at the wall, trying to figure out if the large fish was a barramundi or a saratoga, the two largest species commonly depicted. “This is silly” I remember thinking, “why don’t I just move forward for a closer look?” Finally I dared to take a step but as I moved I glimpsed an enormous snake right in front of me—a lengthy and fat king brown coiled but with its head raised a meter above ground. When I looked at it, its forked tongue shot straight out at me. Quick as a flash I leaped and turned in the air, hit the ground running, and ran so fast my hat went sailing away!

THE WORLD OF ANCIENT ANCESTORS

Australian Aboriginal Caves
and Other Realms within Rock

BY PAUL S. C. TAÇON



Big Bill Neidjie near Cannon Hill, Kakadu National Park, in 1986.

At the time of this unnerving incident I was staying at the Aboriginal outstation of a good friend and mentor, the late Big Bill Neidjie, also known as ‘Kakadu Man.’ I told him of my frightful adventure and he was noticeably concerned. When I described the nature of the site he instantly recognized the location. He then told me that the cave was full of spirits and that there still were bundle burials at the back, on the bottom of the slope. This was a place of both recent and ancient ancestors, sacred but not restricted. His interpretation of the events was that the spirits must have held me back and perhaps alerted me to the danger I would face if I raced into the site as was my usual practice. We both had learned a lesson according to Big Bill. I had learned to be careful, while he learned that the ancestors thought it was alright for me to visit such places.

Thus my personal journey began into the Aboriginal spirit world believed to exist deep inside rock. Big Bill, with the knowledge that the spirits were on my side, soon allowed me to go to other places. He also instructed me in the important stories associated with such locations. From Bill and other elders I learned stories about Namorodo the fisherman, Rainbow Serpents, the friendly but mischievous Mimi, and other spiritual and Ancestral Beings with rocky abodes familiar to Kunwinjku, Gagudju, Gundjeibmi, and other north Australian peoples.

Namorodo was important for many reasons. In appearance he sometimes was short and squat but at other times resembled a giant. In one of the rock shelters there is a painting of Namorodo in tall, human-like form, holding a line with several fish attached. He can also take the form of a white-breasted

To the right, less than 1,000 years in age, this rock painting from Ubirr in Kakadu National Park shows Namorodo holding a line of recently caught fish. Oral history says he punished people who stole his fish by blocking their caves, thus banishing them to a prison inside rock.





Across Aboriginal Australia, Rainbow Serpents figure prominently in art, stories, and ceremony. Sometimes when entering a rock wall they left their image behind, such as this location near the East Alligator River in Kakadu National Park.

sea eagle, the largest predatory bird of the area, which subsists mainly on fish. At night he appears in the sky as a shooting star. It is said that Namorodo takes the souls of the dying away from their bodies.

The main story concerning Namorodo with a landscape association involves people stealing his fish. As he walked back to camp, trailing a long line of fish he had caught earlier in the day, some men from a large group living nearby cut his line to steal his fish. That night, when they and their relatives were in a rock shelter near where I encountered the large king brown, Namorodo came and blocked the shelter entrance with enormous boulders. This is why the current shelter is now so shallow. I was told sometimes you can still hear the people banging inside the rock, trying to get out.

The most powerful Ancestral Beings said to live inside rock are Rainbow Serpents. These creatures are associated with a wide range of landscape features, but in many parts of Australia they travelled through rock, making caves and tunnels in the process. At some locations they left images of themselves behind when they entered a rock wall. Today these paintings can still be found at some special locations. When one hears a buzzing noise inside a rocky outcrop or sees bees fly out of a crack one knows a Rainbow Serpent is inside and nearby.

The most extensive stories about rock-inhabiting creatures revolve around the Mimi. These tall, thin Beings resemble humans in many ways. Originally they had human form and lived on the land. The first ancestors of Arnhem Landers are



The Mimi—spirits living in rock that once had human form—feature in many Arnhem Land stories about the ancient past. Ancient ‘Dynamic Figure’ rock paintings, such as this 10,000 year old one, are believed to have been made by the Mimi.

said to have encountered the Mimi when they were created by the great Ancestral Mother/Rainbow Serpent Yingarna. The Mimi taught the First People important songs, certain ceremonies, how to hunt and butcher kangaroo, and how to paint on rock. Today the Mimi exist as spirits that live inside rock. Early Arnhem Land rock art, especially the so-called Dynamic Figures, is attributed to the Mimi. It is said that inside the rock the world is very similar to that outside, with plants, animals, and elaborate ‘landscapes.’

Elsewhere in Australia, there are many stories about spirits associated with caves and worlds within rock. In southeast Australia, where there has been much change and disruption to traditional Aboriginal societies, stories about Ancestral Beings, caves, and rock continue to be important. This was

recently emphasized in reaction to an important rock art discovery in Wollemi National Park, northwest of Sydney in the Blue Mountains World Heritage Area of New South Wales. The site, Eagle’s Reach, contains over 200 drawings and stencils. A number of Ancestral Beings are depicted, including an incredible Eagle Ancestor ‘holding’ a stenciled boomerang and hafted stone axe. There are also dozens of part-animal/part-human creatures. Eagle’s Reach is associated with the Darug, Darkinjung, and Wiradjuri peoples.

Similar patterns of relationship—between caves, inner rock worlds, Spiritual Beings, dead ancestors, and rock art—can be found throughout the world. Although specific details vary, the associations and interpretations are often similar. Perhaps this highlights the fact that although human cultures come in



Above, Eagle's Reach was found by hikers in 1995 but not scientifically investigated and recorded until 2003. It is one of the best preserved and most cave-like and significant pigment rock art sites west of Sydney. It contains numerous depictions of what have been interpreted as Ancestral Beings. Left, Eagle's Reach is dominated by an extraordinary depiction of an eagle whose various components were added over the past 1,600 years. Originally outlined and partially infilled with black charcoal, a hafted stone axe and a boomerang were later stenciled over its two wing tips. Subsequent powerfully bright white eyes and a white outline reaffirmed the spiritual nature of this Ancestral Being.

many forms there is much shared human experience. One of the most profound is story telling, with stories of creation, rules of conduct, the passing of the dead, encounters with spirits, and the nature of inner and underworlds both particularly important and inextricably linked. Caves are places of profound experience for many people and from such experience order and structure in the form of visual art, myth, and performance can emerge from the chaos of the great dark unknown. 🏠

100 scientific papers on prehistoric art, material culture, and contemporary Indigenous issues.

For Further Reading

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Paul S. C. Taçon at Eagle's Reach, Wollemi National Park, in 2003 when the site was first scientifically documented.

Paul S. C. Taçon/Australian Museum (top), Paul S. C. Taçon (bottom)