

Bark Paintings – Stories

Pukamani symbols used in mortuary ceremony for Bathurst and Melville Islands

Artist: Ali

Country: Melville Island

Date collected: 1969

In the Dreamtime there lived Purakapali and his wife, Wea-ai. The couple had a son named Jinani. One day Purakapali went off hunting for the day. His brother, Tapara, came to the camp and persuaded Wea-ai to go with him into the bush. Wea-ai left her baby son in the shade of a tree, but the shade moved exposing the baby to fierce sunlight for some hours. When she returned, the baby was dead. At the same time, Purakapali came home and, finding his son dead, wept and raged in turn. He then seized his fighting clubs and short spears and attacked his brother Tapara. The two brothers fought fiercely but Tapara could not withstand his brother's wrath and fell back step by step until his back was against a huge tree. Suddenly, the weakening Tapara turned and frantically climbed the tree pursued by Purakapali. The two men fought all the way to the upper most branch of the giant tree till Tapara could go no further. Tapara leapt from the tree to the stars and climbed up into the moon. From there he called out to his brother not to give up all hope as now he was at one with the moon he could give his son life for brief intervals when the moon was full. He explained that as the moon waxed and waned so would the boy. Purakapali climbed down from the tree, sadly shook his head, then weeping and crying out in grief refused the offer, saying that because of their actions his brother and his wife had brought death to the world and he, Purakapali, would make the first Pukamani ceremony for his dead son.

Mimih figures dancing the Ubar Ceremony

Artist: Yirawala

Country: Oenpelli and Croker Island

Date collected: 1969

The Mimih are said to have danced the first Ubar ceremony. This painting shows thin mischievous spirits from the Dreamtime. Dancing men are painted as kangaroos and the Mimih carry dilly bags. The painting also shows other animals, such as wallaby and a smaller unidentified marsupial.

Goanna and Fish totems

Artist: Manggudja

Country: Oenpelli and Croker Island

Date collected: 1971

The painting shows goanna and barramundi – two of the artist's totems, handed down to him from his ancestors. The possession of these totems gives the owner great power and status in the tribe. Lumahlumah, the giant of the Dreamtime, wandered over the area teaching the Gunwinggu about tribal law, ceremony and discipline, and brought the barramundi to Western Arnhem Land. Barramundi are painted in the 'x-ray' style for which Oenpelli artists are famous. Goanna feature in the Ubar Ceremony, which commemorates the deeds of Yirawadbad, a spirit ancestor who became angry because his wife would not live with him. One day, when his wife and her mother went out hunting for goanna, Yirawadbad changed into a serpent, slid into a hollow log, and made scratching noises on the inside of the log. The women ran towards the log and, kneeling down, each inserted a hand into the log. The snake bit each one in turn and they died instantly. In order to placate their tribesmen, Yirawadbad then initiated a huge ceremony in honour of the two women, and this became the sacred Maraian ceremony of Ubar.



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PETITIONS 1963**

Kunmungurr – the Rainbow Serpent creation story

Artist: Nym Bunduk

Country: Port Keats, Kimberley

Date collected: 1971

This painting depicts a sacred ceremony in honour of Kunmungurr, the Rainbow Serpent and the great Creator of the Murinbata people of Port Keats (now called Wadeye). Kunmungurr lived in a deep natural waterhole on top of a mountain. He decided to create people to inhabit the country below him. He picked up a large didjeridu, blew through it and at each blow men, women and children emerged, together with flying foxes and birds. Thus were the Murinbata people and other inhabitants of the land created. The U-shapes in this painting symbolise groups of men sitting around. Two men are shown with dancing weapons. Bush turkeys, which form one of the subjects of song and dance in the sacred ceremony, are shown near waterholes (circles). In the dance, men bob down and raise their heads to imitate the actions of the bush turkeys.

Jarada Emu

Artist: Coppa Manbutji

Country: Beswick Creek

Date collected: 1969

This Mialli tribe painting shows the Dreamtime emu feeding on bush fruit. The emu follows a dreaming path from Beswick Creek, through what is now the town of Mataranka, then Wauchope Bridge, Daly Waters and on through Tennant Creek all the way to Jangala tribal country near Alice Springs. It stops when it reaches Tjingili tribal country and there meets Birigi-birigi the echidna. They tell each other their skin names and ask questions such as where the other is going. On the way to St Teresa Mission water place, the emu meets an old man kangaroo who is trying on a ceremonial headband. The kangaroo sings a song called *Goodoobe*. The emu calls out, 'I am wumut skin, what are you?' The kangaroo does not reply, so the emu walks on until he comes to the pool of a sacred well. The emu enters the pool, drinks and comes out, then makes a camp and sings and dances. The next day he climbs a hill made of sand overlooking the St Teresa community and from there he walks across a flat plain, where he meets the chicken hawk, Karrgine. 'Is that you, Karrgine?' asks the emu and when the bird says yes, the emu says, 'I saw you in another country.'

The Ubar Ceremony – Mother Kangaroo

Artist: Yirawala

Country: Oenpelli and Croker Island

Date collected: 1969

In the Dreamtime an old woman, who was also an old kangaroo, wandered about the land. She had a son named Kundaagi – the red plains kangaroo. The story goes that the Mimih's speared and killed Kundaagi. The old woman, on finding the remains of her son, sang songs and placed some of his smaller bones in her dilly bag. Later, after much ceremony, she placed the bones in a short log and interred them in a cave cleft. 'This is why men do these things today, [because] ... the old Dreaming people did them long ago.' (Yirawala)

Yathalamara Waterhole

Artist: David Daymirringu

Country: Millingimbi and Ramingining

Date collected: 1969

This painting depicts a mortuary ceremony in which a dead man's bones are interred in a hollow log coffin that is planted upright in a sacred totemic clan well (in this case a symbolic hollow dug in the ground). In the ceremony, men are painted as diver ducks, emus and ghosts and the dead man's bones are in a sacred feathered dilly bag. The day after the ceremony, the myth of the old emu man and the crane are re-enacted. The men dance the diver duck dances and then run, bent double, beneath two lines of men swinging bullroarers.*

* A bullroarer is a flat piece of wood (oval shaped), slightly twisted and suspended from a string at one end. It is whirled round and round at arm's length turning on its axis and making a whirring sound, which grows louder and louder the faster it is swung. To the Aborigine it is the voice of the Dreamtime and is considered a sacred object, which only the wisest men can understand.

