



Wandjina Spirit Images

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Background

“Wandjina Spirit Images” refer to painted images that are found on some cave walls and ceilings in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. Wandjina are central to the creation mythology of the Mowanjum people, who are native to the region. The Mowanjum people are composed of three language groups: the Wororra, the Ngarinyin, and the Wunambal.

The association of the Wandjina with the monsoon rains is strong, probably because of the importance of the season to the region’s ecology. The monsoons begin at the end of a season of drought and are crucial to the plant and animal life in the region; they quite literally bring life with them, making survival possible in the region. According to some archaeological research, the earliest images of the Wandjina date back to a period of climactic change beginning around 3800 BC, when the rains weakened and Western Australia entered into about 1,500 years of severe drought. For these reasons, Wandjina spirits are commonly referred to as gods of rain, clouds, and fertility. However, this characterization is incomplete, as the spirits are understood by Aboriginals to be both creators of life on earth and ancestors to their people.

The Mowanjum believe that the Wandjina descended from the skies and embarked upon journeys across the world, creating life wherever they went. They refer to this period of creation as the *Dreamtime*, and the Mowanjum believe that they can still communicate with these beings when entering a dream-state. At the end of these journeys, the Wandjina would paint their images onto rock faces, and enter into nearby water holes. It is from here that the Mowanjum people believe they sprung, direct descendants of the Wandjina.

Each Wandjina’s spirit persists in its image on the rock faces and continues to watch over the regeneration of life in all things. Select elders of the Mowanjum are responsible for ensuring the continuity of these images, and thus the continuity of life on Earth. (The Mowanjum believe that the image on the rock face *is* the living spirit of the Wandjina itself, rather than a mere representation.) Mowanjum elders explain that this responsibility was entrusted to them by the Wandjina as *law*. In fulfilling their duties, the elders periodically retouch or repaint the rock-wall images. The elders also make sure that certain protocols are followed when the Wandjina are depicted in contemporary art (such as is done on bark, shells, baobab nuts, blankets, hardboard and canvas by some Indigenous artists and Indigenous-artist cooperatives). According to their

laws, only descendants of the Wandjina are permitted to paint their images (unless expressly authorized to do so). The elders believe that, should they fail in performing these duties, then the balance between the human and supernatural world will rupture, threatening the cycle of life itself.

The Controversy

In 2006, graffiti images of Wandjina began appearing in Perth, Australia. Within months, the “Wandering Wandjina” (meaning Wandjina that are un-moored from their traditional homes on cave walls and ceilings) began to pop up all over the city, appearing in parking lots and highway overpasses; on trees, apartment buildings, garbage bins, and alley walls. By early 2007 this had become a cultural phenomenon; Perth residents began engaging in “Wandjina watching”: ‘spotting’ new Wandjina graffiti, photographing and geo-tagging them, and uploading their photographs to blogs and websites like Flickr.

Many members of Australian Indigenous groups contended angrily that the graffiti artists and Wandjina watchers were appropriating the sacred imagery without permission. Defenders of the artists and photographers argued (on various grounds) that all people should be free to copy and modify the images.

On the left, below, is a photo of a Wandjina spirit image on a cave wall near Kimberley, Australia. On the right is an example of a “wandering Wandjina.”

Should the law seek in any way to restrict or regulate this practice? Would it matter if the images were printed on T-shirts, which in turn were sold for a profit?



Sources: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wandjina_rock_art.jpg;
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/yelpar/347482246>.