

ABORIGINAL ART: GREAT SANDY DESERT, WESTERN AUSTRALIA AND NORTHERN TERRITORY

The content for this case study is taken directly from the Masters Thesis entitled “ABORIGINAL PEOPLE AND GROUNDWATER” by Bradley J. Moggridge (University of Technology, Sydney, 2005). For full details, refer to the original thesis document, including a comprehensive set of references.

WARNING – THE AUTHOR OF THIS MATERIAL APOLOGISES TO ANY ABORIGINAL PERSON WHO MAY BE DISTRESSED BY THE MENTION OF THE NAMES OF PERSONS WHO MAY NOW BE DECEASED.

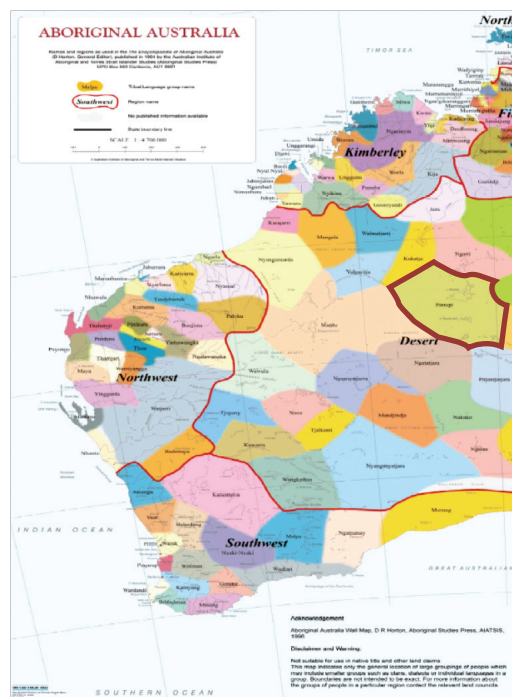
Aboriginal art is described as the oldest continuous tradition of art known. There is no known fixed notion of traditional Aboriginal art, for it is not a static relic of a bygone era but a vital and pertinent expression of current human concerns. Through their art Aboriginal people celebrate the ancestral mythologies which form the basis of their life.

Aboriginal art has played a significant role in classifying, representing and describing significant groundwater sites for Aboriginal tribes, as knowledge of water sources is so important for a tribe’s survival. Aboriginal art was not painted on canvasses or linen as modern society now demands, but Aboriginal people used many mediums such as on the body for ceremonies, rock shelters and platforms, ground designs (sand drawings and ground mosaics also for ceremonies), implements or artefacts, ceremonial poles and the bark off a tree.

Aboriginal art especially originating from desert regions of Australia and in the dot art form such as the Warlpiri and Pintupi Language Groups of the north central part of Australia will constantly make reference to and represent groundwater sources such as soakages and springs. Some good examples of desert art indicating groundwater sources (springs); along with explanations is given in Stokes (1993).

Aboriginal art uses traditional symbols which can be read in many ways. Because of this, even the secret/sacred parts of a story can be painted but still protected, for the artist is the only person who fully understands the meaning.

The following art work is a reproduction of maps incised into spear-throwers indicating the water resources of the Bindibu [=Pintupi] people of Great Sandy Desert, Western Australia.



South Central Australia
Source: Aboriginal Australia Wall Map, Horton D R (1996) Aboriginal Studies Press, AIATSIS Canberra, Australia and Austig/Sinclair, Knight, Merz.z.

The narrative is given in Bayly (1999) and also Brodie (2002) of the original author, Thomson (1962) at the end of his 1957 Bindibu [=Pintupi] Expedition receiving the generous gift from Tjappanongo, who names and describes 49 water sources.

“Just before we left, the old men recited to me names of more than fifty waters – wells, rockholes and claypans – including those that I have described in this narrative; this, in an area that the early explorers believed to be almost waterless, and where all but a few were in 1957, still unknown to the white man. And on the eve of our going, Tjappanongo produced spear throwers, on the backs which were designs deeply incised, more or less geometric in form. Sometimes with a stick, or with his finger, he would point to each well or rock hole in turn and recite its name, waiting for me to repeat it after him.

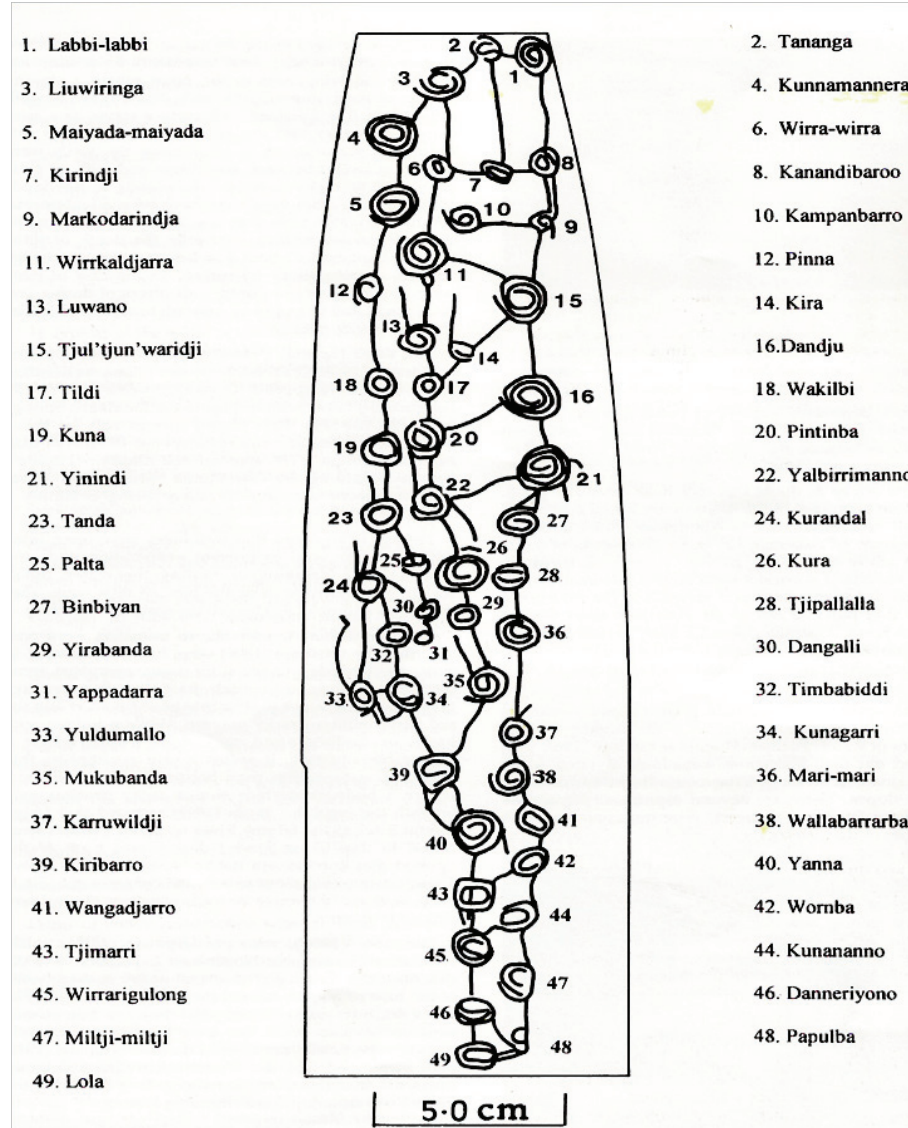


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Each time, the group of old men listened intently and grunted in approval – “Eh!” – or repeated the name again and listened once more. This process continued with the name of each water until they were satisfied with my pronunciation, when they would pass on to the next.

I realized that here was the most important discovery of the expedition – that what Tjappanongo and the old men had sown me was really a map, highly conventionalized, like the work on a “message” or “letter” stock of the Aborigines, of the waters of the vast terrain over which the Bindibu hunted.”

Figure 3

A highly conventionalized map of the Western Australian water resources of the Bindibu [=Pintupi], as carved into the back of a spear-thrower.

Source: Redrawn from a photograph of Thomson (1962) in Bayly (1999) page 19.

Reference:

Bayly I A E (1999) **Review of how indigenous people managed for water in desert regions of Australia**, in *Journal of the Royal Society of Western Australia*, 82:17-25, 1999.

Brodie R S (2002) **Putting Groundwater on the Map: A Status Report on Hydrogeological Mapping in Australia**. CD Proceedings: International Groundwater Conference Darwin 2002 – “Balancing the Budget”.

Horton D R (1996) creator **Aboriginal Australia Wall Map**. Aboriginal Studies Press, Australian Institute of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Canberra, Australia and Auslig/Sinclair, Knight, Merz .

Stokes D (1993) **Desert Dreaming**. Rigby Heinemann Melbourne Australia.

Thomson D F (1962) **The Bindibu Expedition III. The Bindibu**. *Geographical Journal* 128: 262-278.



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