

## *Wanjina: Notes on Some Iconic Ancestral Beings of the Northern Kimberley*

by Kim Akerman

xiii + 179 pp., illus, Hesperian Press, Carlisle, 2016,  
ISBN 9780859056281 (pbk), \$85.00.

Review by Michael P. Rainsbury

Kim Akerman has spent his life researching Aboriginal culture. In this book he collects his thoughts of more than 40 years, plus rare published and previously unpublished material, to give a comprehensive overview of the West Kimberley Wanjina cult and the belief systems of the traditional people there.

Akerman's book is published at an opportune time. It is more than 10 years since Blundell and Woolagoodja's *Keeping the Wanjinas Fresh*, over 20 years after Mowaljarlai and Malnic's *Yorro Yorro*, and Layton's *Australian Rock Art: A New Synthesis*, and almost 50 years after Ian Crawford's *The Art of the Wandjina*. Mike Donaldson's three recent volumes on Kimberley rock art illustrate Wanjina art in glorious colour plates but with only brief accompanying text. Akerman now provides solid content for appreciating and understanding the paintings and the culture behind them.

The book is of value and differs from the previous works mentioned through Akerman's new research discoveries, the first being the work of Yngve Laurell of the First Swedish Scientific Expedition to Australia (1910–11). Laurell, an ethnologist, stayed at Mount Barnett Police Station for several months and drew and photographed in detail. Akerman located photographs and drawings, some of which he has included. He has published the full story as the subject of a separate book.

The main body of work presented for the first time is that of anthropologist John McCaffrey who undertook fieldwork in Mowanjium in the mid-1960s. McCaffrey was interested in the 'process of creation of visual art objects' and recorded the creation of Wanjina art, as well as painted coolamons, along with

interviews with the painters. Akerman's transcription of McCaffrey's notes provides insight into the artists he worked with in Mowanjum, and offers an intimate portrait of how they painted.

The final piece is the collection of information relating to Sea Wanjinas and their activities on the west coast involving the Rock Cod and the Baler Shell, as well as Namarali. Akerman attempts a synthesis, or at least determines common links, between the coastal legends and those of the inland. As his chapter heading asks, are these two sagas or one great saga?

The book is 179 pages long with 79 figures, the main text making up the first half of the book at 93 pages. The remainder consists of nine comprehensive appendices. Section headings within the main text show the breadth of the subjects covered: History of Wanjina Research and Recordings; Wanjinas, Rainmaking and Control of Elements; Sea Wanjinas, Coast Wanjinas – Two Sagas or One Great Saga; Wanjina Art – A General Statement.

The second half of the book consists of appendices covering a range of topics and is the part researchers will use repeatedly. Appendices 1 and 2 describe Wanjina anatomy from diagrams and research literature references. Appendix 3 is a major work by Akerman, a table of all published Wanjina names with their locations and references. Appendix 4 is an analysis of the relationship between Walanganda, Unggud, Galeru and Wanjinas. In the central Kimberley the core of Wanjina mythology is the abuse of Dumbi the Owl and the ensuing battle leading to the dispersal of the Wanjinas throughout the land. This is covered in Appendix 5 where Akerman has collated almost all the published stories on the saga. The coastal stories of the Baler Shell and the Rock Cod are collected in Appendix 6. There is a crossover between the two sets of sagas and this is illustrated in a four-page table which becomes Appendix 7. The final two appendices are concerned with other beings associated with Wanjina rock art and their mythology.

The book is a comprehensive review and analysis of Kim Akerman's research and other literature on the subject. Physically the book is A4 (21 x 29.7cm) in size and printed on gloss paper. Photographs are in full colour and are good quality. My main criticism is in the design of the book, as it resembles a basic printed manuscript, and some of the photographs should have been printed larger. The front cover photograph though is stunning and shows a storm cloud with a Wanjina head superimposed, approaching over water. The fluffiness of the cloud provides the body and the rainfront the legs to this ancestral being. That a picture can say a thousand words is illustrated by this photograph summarising at least two or more pages of text within the main body of the book.

Kim Akerman's *Wanjina: Notes on Some Iconic Ancestral Beings of the Northern Kimberley* is an important piece of work and I consider it a necessary purchase for libraries and researchers' bookcases.

## References

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