

## Chapter 3

### *Ethnographic and archaeological contexts*

#### 3.1 Introduction

Much has been written about the Aboriginal people of central Australia over the past 140 years. The detailed journals of explorers dating from the 1860s provide the earliest written records, while the letters and diaries of early European pastoralists, police and missionaries add colourful detail to the ethnographic record. The fascination of European ethnographers with the ritual and belief systems of 'stone-age' peoples evident towards the end of the nineteenth century (e.g. Tylor 1889; Frazer 1890) stimulated research within Australia resulting in the publication of four books on central Australian Aborigines by Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen (1899; 1904; 1912; 1927, see also Spencer 1896; Chapter 1). But of greater significance to this thesis, Spencer and Gillen provide the earliest and most comprehensive records of the ritual life of the Aboriginal people of central Australia at that time.

Decades later, central Australia was seen as an area where researchers could still gather 'first-class anthropological, ethnological, sociological and linguistic data' (Strehlow 1963:455) and anthropologists and archaeologists from Britain, Europe and the United States (e.g. Davidson 1937; Faulstich 1988; Gould 1978, 1980; Greathouse 1985; Hayden 1981; O'Connell 1977; Layton 1983, 1989; Meggitt 1962; Munn 1973; Myers 1986; Napton & Greathouse 1985; Róheim 1945, 1971; Tonkinson 1974, 1991) and from within Australia (e.g. Berndt 1959; Edwards 1966, 1968, 1971; Elkin 1961; Hamilton 1987; Long 1971; Mountford 1948, 1960, 1968, 1971; Peterson 1969; Pink 1936; Stockton 1971; Strehlow 1948, 1965, 1970, 1971; Thomson 1975) were drawn to the region by the opportunities presented. Most chose to work in the more remote areas away from the central ranges where traditional life had been less interrupted by European incursions. While the focus of their studies was rarely directed towards rock art, the research affords a clearer understanding of the ways in which Aboriginal social and economic systems functioned and provides a contextual

background against which to set rock art within contemporary central Australian Aboriginal societies.

The passing of government legislation over the past decades, which began with Sacred Sites and Land Rights legislation particular to the Northern Territory in the 1975-1976 period, recognises the custodial ownership of Aboriginal sites by Traditional Owners. This has rekindled the earlier interest in rock art research in central Australia (e.g. Edwards 1966, 1968, 1971; Mountford 1948, 1960, 1968, 1971) and resulted in a proliferation of reports focused on the documentation and management of rock art sites (see below). Concomitant with this development, has been the undertaking of a small number of rock art research projects.

The following review of the literature on central Australia is undertaken first, to extract and analyse information pertaining to rock art and ritual in ethnographic accounts in order to assess the role that rock art played in Aboriginal society at the time of contact through to the present. Second, the review will identify issues that have been addressed in previous rock art research within the region and ascertain the strategies used to investigate these questions in order to identify gaps in research and the potential available to address them.

### **3.2 Explorers**

The earliest published accounts of the European exploration of the centre of the Australian continent contain very few descriptions or comments on the rock art (see also Turpin 2001:366 for USA). Exploration parties (e.g. Basedow 1903; Giles 1872-4; Gosse 1873; Stuart 1860-2; Tietkens 1889; Warburton 1872-3) struck out into the unknown and poorly watered interior, with the success of the expeditions dependent on the ability of their leaders to locate a string of springs, soaks or waterholes. As many of the rock art complexes in central Australia are located at, or near water sources, it is likely that these small parties of men (no women were included in these early expeditions) would have observed the paintings and engravings. However, journal entries show that their focus was not anthropological as Carnegie travelling in 1896-7 (1973:171) explained in the account of his prospecting expedition through the Western Desert, 'we took but little notice of the natives, as

obtaining water was of greater interest at that moment than the prosecution of ethnological studies’.

Even if explorers had been intent on recording ethnographic information, initial interactions with the Aboriginal people were problematic and undertaken with extreme caution. Aboriginal people frequently preferred to remain as unseen observers. Giles (1889 [1995:57-9]) records that although Aboriginal people lit fires close by ‘they would not show themselves’ and when the Giles’ party rode up to a group of wurleys (bough shelters) near the George Gill Range (Figure 2.1<sup>1</sup>) ‘their owners having seen us ... fled at our approach’. If interaction did occur, it was with apprehension and occasionally with hostility on both sides where warning shots and a shower of spears were exchanged. When more congenial encounters did take place, communication was restricted to sign language and gestures, so that there would have been little opportunity to learn about the origins or meaning of rock art. Stuart described one such encounter ‘...he was very talkative, but I could make nothing of him. I have endeavoured, by signs, to get information from him ... but we cannot understand each other’ (Hardman 1984:213).

A rare, early description of central Australian rock art and the technique used to apply the motifs is recorded in Giles’ journal of 1872 (Giles 1889[1995]:39-44). While searching for a possible source of water at a place he named the Tarn of Auber, (*Tjungkupu* Smith 1988:133) Giles described:

One device represents a snake going into a hole; the body of the reptile is curled round and round the hole, though its breadth is out of proportion to its length, being seven or eight inches thick, and only two to three feet long. It is painted with charcoal ashes which had been mixed up with some animal’s or reptile’s fat.

Giles 1889[1995]:41  
(see also Stirling 1896:Plate 2; Walsh 1988:28-9).

He also noted that the technique used to produce red and black handstencils was ‘precisely the same’ as that he has seen in the Barrier Range and mountains east of the Darling in New South Wales. Giles’ observation is the first that suggests the possibility that similar forms of rock art might occur across the Australian continent.

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<sup>1</sup> Place names mentioned in this chapter are included on Figure 2.1 and art complexes on Figure 7.2.

Further to the south, at a campsite Giles called Glen Thirsty (*Yatajirra*, Peter Bullah personal communication), he described several additional art sites (Plate 3.1), which he labelled 'The Aboriginal National Gallery of painting and hieroglyphics':

We ... found a Troglodytes' cave ornamented with the choicest specimens of aboriginal art. The rude figures of snakes were the principal objects, but hands, and other devices for shields were also conspicuous. One hieroglyphic was most striking; it consisted of two Roman numerals – a V and an I, placed together and representing the figure VI; they were both daubed over with spots, and were painted with red ochre.

Giles 1995:50 (see also Worsnop 1897:29).

Giles' remarks remained the only detailed recording of rock art in the region until anthropological research commenced in central Australia more than two decades later.

### 3.3 Anthropologists

The first expedition to central Australia aimed specifically at collecting anthropological information was the Horn Scientific Expedition which set out in 1894 to 'record the geology, flora, fauna of that little known region, together with the manners, customs and appearance of the aboriginals in their primitive state ... as in a few years they will be all either dead or semi-civilized' (Stirling cited in Mulvaney 1996:4). It was within this biological evolutionary framework of the time that Edward Stirling was appointed as medical officer and anthropologist to the expedition. The anthropological volume (Stirling 1896) published two years later disappointed other participants who were left to edit and add to Stirling's 'slim' contribution. Mulvaney (1996:6) observed that 'to judge from Stirling's surviving notebook ... his observations on Aboriginal subjects were few and scrappy'. The volume includes a short description of the locations where rock art was observed, interpretations that rely on the likeness of the motifs to the subjects they are thought to represent, generalisations about the techniques used and illustrations of selected motifs from the George Gill Range, the Tarn of Auber and Ayers Rock (*Uluru*).

The most significant anthropological outcome of the Horn Expedition was the meeting of Baldwin Spencer, Professor of Biology at Melbourne University and Frank Gillen, the Post and Telegraph Stationmaster and Sub-Protector of Aborigines at Alice Springs; a meeting that forged a 'true partnership' (Mulvaney *et al.* 1997:25). Their

collaboration continued for almost two decades and resulted in the publication of detailed volumes on Aboriginal society (e.g. Spencer & Gillen 1899; 1904; 1912; 1927). Their collaborative technique and the information that this enabled them to collect and analyse, broadened the scope of questions addressed by anthropologists and led to a deeper understanding of the complexity of Aboriginal social systems, thus influencing the direction of anthropological research worldwide (see Morphy 1996; Mulvaney *et al.* 1997, Chapter 1). Gillen had taken time to gain the confidence of local Aboriginal people and this afforded both Gillen and Spencer the rare, first-hand opportunity to watch Arrernte<sup>2</sup> ceremonial gatherings.

Mulvaney *et al.* (1997:34-38) have summarised the theoretical directions of Spencer and Gillen's research, arguing that initially they sought to understand the relationship between the Arrernte totemic belief system and exogamy and thus, undertook a comprehensive exploration of the nexus between kinship and marriage systems (Spencer & Gillen 1899). The realisation that the Arrernte conceived the central Australian landscape in terms of a dense network of intersecting Ancestral Tracks, led Spencer and Gillen to undertake an ethnographic analysis of the relationship between Ancestral actions which were believed to have created all landforms in the *Alcheringa*, the time of creation, (or as it became known, the Dreaming), and particular locations and landforms where these actions took place (Spencer & Gillen 1899). Cowle, a Mounted Constable stationed at Illamurta, east of the George Gill range, wrote to Spencer explaining that the presence of each and every waterhole, rocky outcrop, hill or topographical feature could be accounted for by the travels of the *Alcheringa* Ancestors, also known as Totemic Ancestors, Ancestral Beings or Heroes (Cowle 28th May 1900, [in Mulvaney 2000 *et al.*:138]). Spencer and Gillen's analysis also exposed the significance of the role of the *churinga* (sacred stones and boards) in ritual activities, and of particular relevance to this thesis, they explored the ways in which graphic systems were interrelated and integrated into the *Alchering*, and thus into Arrernte society.

Spencer and Gillen published descriptions of selected rock art motifs at two sites additional to those published in 1896: Emily Gap (*Nthwerrke*) and Kuyunba

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<sup>2</sup> 'Arunta' Spencer and Gillen 1899, 'Aranda' Strehlow 1947

(*Quiurnpa*). The illustrations of the motifs are accompanied by interpretations supplied by informants in which the relationship between particular motifs and the past Ancestral actions at the site is explained. For example, the striped panel at Emily Gap (Plate 3.2), a caterpillar (*Udnirringita*) totemic site, represents the *Alcheringa* woman with her hand up to her head, looking up towards the sacred cave opposite, where one of the great leaders of the men in the *Alcheringa* performed the ceremonies relating to the caterpillar, while the three circles on the left represent the eggs of the caterpillar (1899:Figure 132). Similarly at Kuyunba, informants interpreted some of the geometric motifs as representing the *Nurtunja*, or sacred poles associated with the activities of a group of uncircumcised *Alcheringa* men of the plum tree totem and the two women of the bandicoot totem who accompanied them (1899:Figure 133). It is evident even from this small sample, that while the motifs have a loose iconic relationship to the objects they represent, without similar instruction, the viewer today would be unable to attach the same meaning as the Aboriginal people instructed in the sacred stories and traditions.

Spencer and Gillen (1927:572-5) discerned two distinct categories of rock art based on their informants' knowledge; the sacred rock art or *ilkinia*, (also called *churinga ilkinia*) like those recorded at Emily Gap, and the 'ordinary rock drawings'. Each totem had one or more *ilkinia* or sacred designs associated with it, and according to tradition, these were originally created by Ancestral Beings who painted them at various places where Totemic Ancestors had performed particular activities in the past. The origin of sacred rock art was not attributed to human hands, but perceived as an act of the Ancestors undertaken during the *Alcheringa*. The meanings of sacred motifs were handed down from generation to generation in a number of stages so that knowledge was accumulated over time. Most of the sacred rock art was geometric with concentric circles, sinuous lines and parallel striped designs frequently used. The *ilkinia* motifs were commonly painted near the sacred storehouse that was the hiding place for the *churinga* related to the totem associated with that site. Ideally, as women and children were forbidden near such storehouses, they never saw the sacred paintings. These beliefs are still held today by Aboriginal people in central Australia (Gunn 1995a, 2000a).

‘Ordinary geometric rock-drawings’, in contrast to sacred designs, do not appear to have a definite meaning ‘...The native, when asked the meaning of certain drawings such as these, will constantly answer that they are only play-work and mean nothing’ (Spencer & Gillen 1927:575). The same motifs produced in another places or contexts have very definite meaning. Spencer and Gillen (1927:554) explained that ‘[T]here is nothing whatever sacred about the circles as circles; they are only regarded as such when drawn on an object which itself is sacred’. The meaning of a motif is only *activated* when it is produced on an object or at a location associated with the actions of the Ancestral Beings in the *Alcheringa*, rather than by the form of the motif itself (see also Munn 1973). Spencer and Gillen concluded that Aboriginal people produced the ordinary geometric motifs in their ‘spare time’ inspired by totemic motifs they had observed elsewhere. If sacred and ‘play-work’ motifs can be identical, there is no way for the uninformed viewer to establish if one is sacred and the other not, although Spencer and Gillen stated that *all* motifs at sacred sites were considered sacred even if they were not directly attributable to totemic activities.

Spencer and Gillen (1899:193-201; 1912:93-97) recorded one example that demonstrates the way in which rock art *functions* as part of Arrernte ceremonial activity. At Undiara (*Indiarra*), (see also *Antiarra*, Stirling 1896:67) a totemic kangaroo site where many of the physical features have some traditional association with the Kangaroo *Alcheringa* Ancestors, there is a large painting more than 16 metres long and two metres high comprised of red and white stripes about 30 centimetres wide, which is located at the base of a rocky scarp by a waterhole. When the Aboriginal people wished to increase the number of kangaroos, the appropriate men came to this rock and performed certain ceremonies. First, they *repainted* the red and white stripes, the red representing the fur of the animal and the white the bones. Then a number of younger men cut a vein in their arm and allowed the blood to flow over the top of the painting while the onlookers chanted the relevant songs relating to the activities of the Kangaroo Ancestors. These actions are believed to make the spirit kangaroos that live within the rock go out and give rise to real kangaroos. *Interaction* with the design representing the kangaroo resulted in the increase of a valued food source. Many of the other ceremonies recorded by Spencer and Gillen (1899; 1912; 1927) were performed in order to increase a particular totemic species

but no other interaction with rock art is documented, nor is the function of rock art in these ceremonies discussed.

Spencer and Gillen (1927:144) recorded an additional function for rock art. *Ilkinia* were used as a template for body decoration prepared for ceremonial events, and were painted on participants' bodies in ochre, blood, grease and charcoal with plant and feather down frequently added. Some designs represented patterns belonging to particular totemic locations. For example, at one ceremony witnessed by Spencer and Gillen, the design painted in red and white ochre on the chest of the participant, consisted of long vertical parallel lines copied from the sacred painting at Emily Gap, (see Spencer & Gillen 1899:177, Figure 28) which the performers believed has existed there since 'time immemorial'.

However, when comparing the designs on the *churinga* from Emily Gap with the rock art at this location, in this case anyway, the rock art did not provide the template for the pattern on the *churinga*. The design on the *churinga*, like the rock art, relates to the Caterpillar Ancestors' activities at Emily Gap. The striped motifs which dominate the rock art are replaced by a series of sinuous lines and curved rake motifs on the *churinga* (see Spencer & Gillen 1899:148, Figure D). It would appear then, that the relationship between a particular site and a particular totemic ancestor and the designs relating to them are arbitrary and do not follow strict conventions across all mediums in which they are produced.

The arbitrary nature of the Arrernte graphic system is stressed in Spencer and Gillen's analysis of painted or incised designs on wooden and stone *churingas*. They found that *churinga* designs could be readily interpreted by appropriate informants and although only a small range of core motifs was utilised, each motif could be interpreted in many different ways. Concentric circles are the most frequently produced motif on *churinga* and, depending upon the totemic affiliation of each, they may represent objects or items as different as trees, the eggs of grubs, or frogs. On one *churinga* decorated with four similar concentric circles, one represented the eye, another the intestines, another the painting on the stomach and the fourth represented the 'posterior part of the man' (Spencer & Gillen 1899:144-151, 1912:207-217). It is clear then, that with no discernible iconic reference and no standardised meaning for a

motif, the specific meaning of each motif on the *churinga* must be learned. The motif meanings are said to be held in custody by the members of the totemic group to whom the *churinga* belongs and are passed on from generation to generation.

Where these *churinga* came from originally, who they were made by, and when and by whom they were gathered together are questions that cannot be answered. Many of them are evidently of great antiquity.

Spencer & Gillen 1899:141

The research of Spencer and Gillen has underlined the complexity of the art system in central Australia. To summarise; first, they showed that painted rock art, body decorations, ground paintings and *churinga* were all associated with the actions of the *Alcheringa* Ancestors and were the province of men. Second, the meaning of designs could only be sought from knowledgeable informants, and even then, interpretations could not be transposed to cover identical designs as meanings can differ according to the context in which they are found. Third, the context of a motif also made one motif sacred while the same motif elsewhere may have been considered 'ordinary'. Fourth, they suggested two functions for rock art: rock art could be the visual evidence signifying the presence of the spirit of an Ancestral Being that could be activated by the performance of a particular interactive ritual that resulted in an increase in that particular species, or, alternatively, rock art could be used as template for ceremonial body decoration. Finally, they suggested that as many of the *churinga* appear extremely worn, they were likely to be of great antiquity. Aligned with this is the implicit notion that if the origin of the rock art is attributed to the *Alcheringa*, it too may be of considerable antiquity.

There is nothing in Spencer and Gillen's published works to suggest that they witnessed the production of rock paintings and stencils although they discussed the materials and techniques used to do so and recorded numerous body painting events. While they documented the repainting of the panel at Undiarra, they did not suggest that rock art was still being produced. In total, they published illustrations of rock art from seven complexes with three sites being additional to those recorded during the Horn Expedition. It appears that after 1894, they only recorded two rock art sites themselves despite the fact that they mention an overnight camp at Ooraminna Rockhole, *en route* to Alice Springs. Spencer must have been aware of the spectacular art sites beside the waterhole (see Gunn 1991b, Chapter 5). Gillen's

letters to Spencer (Mulvaney *et al.* 1997) mentioned drawings of rock art sites, but I have been unable to relocate these or ascertain to which sites they refer. It may well be that Spencer and Gillen only published details of the rock art from sites where they were able to document the meanings of the motifs. What is significant is that they do not mention engraved rock art at all despite the fact that Spencer must have seen the engravings at the Tarn of Auber and Gillen may have seen those at Kuyunba. Again, it may be that they were unable to find knowledgeable informants to interpret the engravings. This was certainly the case when A. J. Giles<sup>3</sup> unsuccessfully sought informants to interpret engravings at a site on the Finke River in 1873 (Worsnop 1897:45, Plate 23). Alternatively, it may suggest that engravings were not perceived as central to the ritual activities of the time.

T. G. H. (Ted) Strehlow also collected a vast amount of anthropological material in Central Australia. He was a fluent speaker of Arrernte having grown up at Hermannsburg Mission where his father, Carl, was a Lutheran pastor. T. G. H. Strehlow claimed that his thorough knowledge of the Arrernte language placed him in a unique position to gain the trust of informants and participate in many of the most sacred aspects of Arrernte life (Strehlow 1964:33). His two major publications (Strehlow 1947,1971) record aspects of the ritual life he witnessed and the Dreaming myths and in particular, the song cycles that relate to the activities of the Ancestral Beings. Later in his life, Strehlow recorded detailed genealogies that he used to further his understanding of the relationship between the complex Arrernte kinship systems and the land. His failure to include details concerning rock art sites in his publications, given the perception today that rock art is an integral part of the sacred sites where it occurs, is difficult to explain. The exclusion of details suggests that either Strehlow viewed rock art as peripheral to the issues he deemed significant (but see Strehlow 1964:458) or his particular informants did.

His father, Carl Strehlow, records that his informants regarded rock paintings as 'mere decorations' (C. Strehlow 1907-20:9 *translation from German*) suggesting that at least in Western Arrernte country, rock art may not have been central to ceremonial

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<sup>3</sup> Not to be confused with the explorer, Ernest Giles.

life at that time. K. Mulvaney<sup>4</sup> (1993:110), explained Traditional Owners' perspectives on rock art today, by pointing out that while rock art may be the only constructed manifestation of the mythological association of a site, for Aboriginal custodians, in contrast to rock art researchers, it may not be seen as the most significant aspect of the site. It is also possible that Carl Strehlow's informants may have been unwilling to divulge information about rock art or alternatively, may have lost the knowledge held previously due to the smallpox epidemic that decimated the population in the century prior to white settlement (Kimber 1996:94-96). Evidence for other changes in traditional life, including the introduction of the subsection system and new rituals, marks this century as one of social upheaval (Kimber 1996:92-4). Later rapid changes resulting from the introduction of the pastoralism into central Australia in the nineteenth century prior to Strehlow's research, would also have disrupted traditional lifestyles. The lack of information on rock art in T. G. H. Strehlow's publications may simply have been that, as a trained linguist, his interest lay elsewhere.

However, several points made by Strehlow (1964) about the graphic art system are pertinent to the study of rock art. First, he noted that each totemic centre in central Australia was associated with one or several sets of sacred patterns that were 'believed to have been provided by the local supernatural beings' (Strehlow 1964:50). These patterns were '*rigidly formalised*' (my emphasis) and adhered to, although changes could be made to secular designs. Second, he emphasised that each pattern was related to a *specific location* rather than to a totemic Dreaming Track. This means that locations linked by the same Dreaming would not use the same designs, rather each location would be represented by its *own* design, so that there is *no graphic patterning* that can be directly linked to specific Dreaming Tracks as they are understood today.

There is evidence that T. G. H. Strehlow may have considered rock art in central Australia to be inferior to rock art in other parts of Australia and therefore unworthy of study. His contribution to a book on Aboriginal art demonstrated that he

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<sup>4</sup> Ken Mulvaney will be referenced using the initial of his given name to differentiate him from D. J. Mulvaney who is referenced as 'Mulvaney'.

understood the integrated nature of central Australian graphic systems and the sacred and ritual world of the Arrernte (Strehlow 1964) but he argued that:

The rock paintings and rock carvings of inland Australia may be mentioned only in passing... For instance, the cave drawings at Ayers Rock, many of which are secular, and some of which add human and animal forms to the usual footmarks, circles, and similar geometric figures are widely known now to European tourists. There are also many other places in the Centre where simple, painted designs occur, and a number of sites which show simple figures engraved into rocky surfaces; but in point of artistic interest none of the works at these inland sites can compare with the rock paintings and carvings found in certain other parts of the continent, especially in northern and north-western Australia.

(Strehlow 1964:55)

A similar conclusion is drawn on the aesthetic merits of central Australian rock art by A. P. Elkin (1961:228), based on field work undertaken in the region in 1930 and 1953: 'Pictorial art in this region is poorly developed. Cave and rock-paintings, which are not numerous, are usually of conventional designs. The naturalistic paintings are crude.' Adam (1960:352) published similar disparaging comparisons between central Australian rock art and that in the north (see also Thomson 1975:138) describing 'the austerity of the comparatively few, simple designs' and concluding that 'the Aranda can only be described as a Spartan people as far as graphic art is concerned'. The concurrence of these opinions suggests that such dismissive and judgemental views of central Australian rock art may have been standard at that time and may partly explain the absence of detailed studies in the anthropological literature of this period.

Nancy Munn (1973:xv) lends strength to this argument by stating that in the late 1950s 'there was little interest on the part of most social anthropologists in the theoretical problems of cultural symbolism'. Anthropologists, such as Meggitt (1962), Myers (1986), Peterson (1969), Hamilton (1987), Long (1971), and Tonkinson (1991) working amongst western linguistic groups such as the Warlpiri and Pintupi, focused their research instead, on the social structure and the religious and economic systems. Munn in contrast, undertook a detailed structural analysis of Walbiri (now more commonly spelt Warlpiri) graphic systems in which she studied not only the dynamics of the generation of art but also the relationships between

graphic systems and Warlpiri society and culture. Munn's main analysis centred on sand and crayon drawings rather than rock art, and, although many of the operative principles she documented cannot be directly transposed onto the study of rock art, they do provide a comprehensive account of the potency of art and the ways in which the graphic system functioned in the recent past. Of particular relevance for the study of rock art, Munn (e.g.1973:137) demonstrated that, just as Spencer and Gillen had found, a single motif could encode a number of meanings *at the same time*, and the relevant meaning would depend on the knowledge of the viewer and the context in which the motif was produced. The multivalent quality of motifs, along with the complexity of motif interpretation outlined earlier by Spencer and Gillen (see above), highlights the futility of any outside attempt to interpret a single *correct* meaning for rock art in the region.

Charles Mountford, an anthropologist from Adelaide University, like Munn, focussed his research on graphic systems. He led expeditions (commencing in the 1940s) to Ayers Rock (*Uluru*), Walinga Hill (*Kulpitjata*), Mount Olga (*Katajuta*) and into the Warburton, Mann, and Musgrave Ranges to the south, the Amunurunga Range in the west, into the Warlpiri Ranges north of the study area, as well as the central ranges of the Arrernte (Mountford 1948, 1955, 1960, 1968, 1971, 1976) where, over decades, he recorded the art, myths and totemic geography of the people from these regions. Mountford utilised a psycho-analytical research technique which was popular at the time (see also Basedow 1904:39-41; Mountford 1976:94; Munn 1973:xix-xx) where Aboriginal men, women and children were asked to draw whatever they liked on paper with crayons and finger paints. He analysed the drawings and found that the men, almost exclusively, created balanced abstract designs depicting narratives relating to the travels of Ancestral Beings (Mountford 1976:95, Taylor 1979). He noted that they used a similar range of motifs to those he had recorded in the engraved rock art in South Australia (Mountford 1929). The women, in contrast, drew pictures relating to camp life and food gathering activities. Munn identified a similar gender dichotomy amongst the Warlpiri (Munn 1973). Aboriginal informants travelled with Mountford to the locations depicted in the drawings where he was able to photograph and record details of the myths relating to the Ancestral Heroes and the associated increase ceremonies. Significantly, *relatively few* of the locations identified in the drawings and visited by Mountford contained rock art.

Mountford (1976) did, however, contribute substantially to what is known about rock art. Detailed recording at Ayers Rock and Walinga Hill showed that rock painting remained a 'living art' amongst the Aboriginal people of the region and myths and interpretations could be offered by the informants for some of the motifs (*cf.* Gunn and Thorn 1997b; Harney 1957; Hill 1994 59-65; Layton 1992:57; Wallace & Wallace 1977). Not only did he record post-contact motifs such as horses and camel trains to substantiate this claim, he recorded one of the Aboriginal informants who accompanied his 1940 expedition painting a motif at Ayers Rock (see also Layton 1992:57). The artist applied the ground red ochre and pipeclay with a finger and outlined the motif with a brush made from bark (Mountford 1948:87-88 Plate opposite P77). Significantly, Mountford recorded that the Aboriginal artist became wary after painting the motif as he acknowledged he did not have the permission of the owner of the site to produce the painting. Further evidence that the production of rock art in this region was ongoing is demonstrated in the comparison of photographs taken in 1930 by Michael Terry with those taken by Mountford in 1940 at Mutitjulu (*Mutitjilda*) Cave at Ayers Rock. There had been both a rapid build up of motifs, and the obliteration, erosion or fading of others over this short period of time (Mountford 1971:175-179).

A rapid alteration of motifs was also recorded by Mountford at *Jukiuta Cave* near Yuendumu. Photographic records show the dominant snake motif has been over-painted many times and additional designs have been added to other parts of the shelter wall (see also Peterson unpublished notes cited in Layton 1992:54). This renovation, which Mountford witnessed, has, according to his informants, no ritual or magical function as the painting is acknowledged as the work of Aboriginal people (Mountford 1968:69). Other interaction with the painted motif gives some insight into one of the ways in which rock art was used:

An old Aboriginal, taking the right hand of each initiate in turn, rubbed it on the rock from the tail to the head of the snake painting, then, retracing his steps, placed the hand of the initiate on each individual design, at the same time explaining its mythical significance.

(Mountford 1968:69-70)

In addition to the *didactic role* that rock art played, Mountford (1968:70) recorded that one of the first acts any Aboriginal man undertook when visiting the cave, was to rub his hands along the whole length of the painted snake body while chanting the appropriate songs. This action was designed to please the spirit of the snake so that it would prevent real snakes from biting people in the region, rather than to stimulate the reproduction of snakes. In contrast, interactions which *involved the rubbing of churinga* or stones at sacred sites, the production of dust at sacred sites or the throwing of small stones collected at sacred sites into the air, were usually associated with releasing the spirit of the totemic species associated with the object as part of an increase ritual (Mountford 1976) or as Meggitt (1962:221) stated, amongst the Warlpiri, these interactions were undertaken to maintain the natural supply of species.

Mountford (1960) determined that, unlike the painted rock art, the engraved rock art he documented throughout central Australia, including the main faces at Ewaninga, was similar to that he had recorded previously in South Australia. He had concluded that the South Australian engraved assemblage was an 'ancient' and 'extinct' art form (Mountford 1971:157; 1976:74). His conclusions were based on several strands of evidence: the patination and general deterioration of the motifs; the presence of engravings identified as extinct animals; and the fact that he could not find Aboriginal informants who knew how the engravings were made, or who could 'interpret or explain the meaning of any except the well known creatures and tracks' (Mountford 1976:74). Informants attributed the origin of the engravings to 'mythical heroes during the creation period' (Mountford 1955:145). If, as Mountford recorded, it was generally believed that engravings were *no longer incorporated into contemporary belief systems*, this might explain why Strehlow and Spencer and Gillen did not document engraved rock art in central Australia. Mountford published drawings of engraved motifs but did not speculate on their meanings (see also Basedow 1914; Pringle & Kollosche 1958). While he noted that the range of motifs is less varied than that used in the painted assemblages, he did not attempt to explain the apparent similarity between the crayon motifs mentioned previously and the engraved motifs.

Mountford did, however, record a range of motifs produced using an engraving technique he called 'pounding' which was still in use until at least the 1950's. Mountford (1955:345) described the technique:

The artist pounds the surface of the rock with a small rounded boulder held in the hand, thereby breaking its patinated surface and leaving a light-coloured design of abraded stone.

Mountford observed Aboriginal men pounding both abstract and figurative motifs and these were interpreted as representing hunting narratives and other non-sacred topics. Mountford's first hand description of the poundings provides evidence that engraving, at least in one form, continued into the recent past.

### 3.4 Rock Art Researchers

Bob Edwards as Curator of Anthropology at the South Australian Museum, was the first researcher to undertake an archaeological analysis of rock art in central Australia (Edwards 1965, 1966, 1968, 1971). His archaeological approach, which focused on the engraved assemblage, differed from the anthropological direction of previous studies. He flagged the potential of comparative analysis based on *motif classification* rather than research that relied on *motif interpretation*. Further, he did not confine his recording to the art alone, but documented the environmental features of each complex and the associated archaeological material and, from these, was able to place the engraved assemblage into a proposed social and geographic context. He developed this approach while studying engraved assemblages in South Australia where, like Mountford, he was unable to find knowledgeable informants to interpret the engravings for him. He did, however, recognise the potential in central Australia to document evidence of the association between persisting present day Aboriginal ritual activities and rock engravings (see Gunn below).

Edwards' analytical technique included the recording of absolute frequencies for ten motif types at each complex (Edwards 1971). When undertaking analyses between complexes he compared the relative percentages of grouped motif types. Using this coarse-grained scale, Edwards found that there was a striking consistency in relative percentages of three grouped motif classes across vast areas of the arid zone. When he combined two of the grouped classes, animal tracks and circles, he found that together, they made up 83% (Cleland Hills) and 95.7% (*Tukulnga*, Tarn of Auber) of all motifs at the two central Australian sites published. This was a similar proportion to the percentages he had recorded for complexes in South Australia. He hypothesised that the perceived similarity between the engraved art assemblage across

such a vast area might mean that the art was produced prior to the establishment of present day tribal boundaries (Edwards 1971:363). Edward's approach that used relative frequencies was adopted by later rock art researchers, in particular, Lesley Maynard who formulated an Australian-wide stylistic rock art synthesis and introduced the concept of a pan-Australian engraving style which she called Panaramitee (Maynard 1979; cf. Bednarik 1995; Rosenfeld 1991).

Edwards based his argument for 'considerable antiquity' on the patination and extreme weathering of the motifs and the disintegration or disturbance of many of the original rock surfaces (Edwards 1966:37). The absence of dingo tracks amongst the patinated motifs suggested to him that the engravings might have been made prior to the introduction of the dingo into Australia later established to be about 4000 years ago (Gollan 1984:926). The association of 'ancient stone industries' at engraved sites and the dating of two excavated samples of engraved rock art elsewhere in Australia (see Chapter 6) were used to support his claim for antiquity. In addition to the similarity in patination and weathering, and in the composition between distant engraved complexes, Edwards (1971:358) outlined two other constant features. Complexes were found in close proximity to regular sources of water and alongside other archaeological evidence of human occupation.

The apparent antiquity of the engraved assemblage in the Cleland Hills and the occurrence of 16 unique heart-shaped faces of owl-like appearance showing a range of facial expressions which were unlike any other engravings recorded (Edwards 1968) had led some to suggest that they may owe their origin to Assyrian art (Terry 1974:165). While Edwards did not give credence to the concept that the engravings might be the product of some known ancient civilization, the informants he questioned assured him the engravings were not produced by Aboriginal people, but had been put there by Ancestral Beings in the Dreaming.

Richard Gould, working in the Western Desert with the Ngatatjara (*Ngaatjatjarra*) people, found they too attributed the origin of rock engravings to the *tjukurpa* (*Alcheringa* or Dreaming). Motifs were considered to be the tangible remains of the decorative patterns painted on the bodies of novices before they were shown the sacred dances by Totemic Ancestors (Gould 1969:152). Gould's informants

considered rock paintings to depicted subjects related to sacred ceremonies and took their form from the body decorations used in totemic rituals and were therefore sacred. They also accepted that the paintings could be altered or added to, unlike sacred stone alignments or landmarks (Gould 1969:149). Like Mountford, Gould recorded Aboriginal men producing rock paintings. One of the freshly produced paintings he recorded was interpreted as depicting the track taken by Totemic Ancestors during the Dreamtime and was painted 'as a token of mutual affiliation and respect for the sacredness of the site' (Gould 1969:153). Significantly, the motif produced was not related to the central Dreaming known for the site but was a motif that held significance for the painter. A more functional meaning was attributed to a 'series of track' motifs commonly found in secluded areas where hunters waited for game, the production of which was said to 'hasten the arrival of their quarry' (Gould 1969:153). This interpretation appears impractical as the noise made while producing the tracks would surely have frightened any game away. Interpretations of track motifs are frequently attributed to aspects of hunting (e.g. Munn 1973), but Gould's observation is a unique reference to central Australian rock art being produced as a form of *hunting magic*.

Gould's ethnoarchaeological research (1980) focused on foraging strategies, stone tool technology and rock art in both the Western and Central Deserts. Although there appeared to be many similarities between the rock art in the two areas, Gould also recognised a number of distinct differences. His emphasis on the differences between the two areas appears to have been influenced by the writing of T. G. H. Strehlow who stated that the Western Desert groups lacked many of the social and ceremonial aspects of the Arrernte (Strehlow 1965:122; but see also Morton 1997:121; Keen 1997). Gould argued that Central Desert rock art was richer and more diverse than the art he had recorded in the Western Desert and he sought an explanation for the differences. He described Western Desert rock paintings as consisting of small designs, often superimposed but not repainted. Hand stencils were totally absent, and, while the motif range in the two engraved assemblages was similar, the sites to the west were smaller. The large dominant designs, the *ilkinia* of the Arrernte which show evidence of retouch, were also absent in the west. Gould avoided making a direct correlation between richer resources in the Arrernte area and increased social and ritual activity. Instead he suggests that the differences could be related to the

larger human population in the Central Desert where water supplies were both more plentiful and more reliable (Gould 1980:203; see also Layton 1992:236 for an alternative explanation based on the timing of the adoption of clan totemism).

Working on a finer scale than either Edwards or Gould, Sarah Forbes (1992) undertook a formal analysis within a single large engraved site complex at N'Dhala Gorge, east of Alice Springs. Not only did this enable her to test Edwards' hypothesis about the uniformity of percentages of particular motif types in an engraved assemblage, she was also able to demonstrate spatial and temporal patterning within the complex. While she did not go on to explain these patterns in terms of past human behaviour, her results challenged Edwards' findings and demonstrated the potential of fine-scaled research.

A more recent fine-grained study undertaken by Ursula Frederick (1997) in Watarrka National Park in the George Gill Range related the patterning in rock art production to changes in Aboriginal society. Frederick identified two temporal phases in the rock art assemblage, with engravings in the earlier phase and painting, stencils and drawing in the later phase. Her analysis showed that, although a core vocabulary of graphic marks had persisted through time and across technique, there had also been changes and innovations in motif production, both in form and medium. Significantly, there had been corresponding changes in the distribution of site locations, motif types and techniques across the landscape.

Focussing particularly on the extensive drawn assemblage that had been largely ignored by previous researchers (but see Smith & Rosenfeld 1992 and more recently Gunn 1999a), Frederick found that, while both drawing and painting appeared contemporaneously, drawing was more common amongst the most recent art. She argued convincingly that the disruption caused to traditional Aboriginal movements by the pastoral industry in this region from 1885 onwards may have limited access to ochre sources, thus paintings became more difficult to produce. Additionally, drawings could be made spontaneously and opportunistically as the pigment (mostly charcoal) is readily available and does not need any preparation, a consideration Frederick argued, for travelling Aboriginal stockmen, busy with station duties. Further, a finely drawn charcoal line proved an ideal means to produce the new

detailed motifs of horses, camels, clothed people and other post-contact images recorded at Watarrka. Frederick noted that the increased complexity (more elements combined to make one visual image) observed amongst the drawn motifs, paralleled the complexity in the drawings Mountford had commissioned. Less convincingly, Frederick argued that the new complexity was the result of disparate groups of Aboriginal people being separated from their own 'country' for long periods, living in forced aggregation at stations or missions and thus, when producing art, they needed to find new means to encode distant totemic places into a single image. The disruption of traditional lifestyles was seen by Frederick to result in the creation of new rock art sites in rugged and less accessible areas of the range. In summary, Frederick's dissertation ably demonstrated that the patterns she discerned in the rock art assemblage could be attributed to the transition of Aboriginal society from a tradition of pre-European indigenous society to a society engaged in the process of inter-cultural contact with Europeans.

Brett Galt-Smith's (1997) central Australian regional rock art research, which is pertinent to the current thesis (see Chapter 1), tested Meg Conkey's aggregation and dispersion model (1980) and found that painted rock art assemblages across the region were more diverse at ethnographically documented ritual sites, but the relationship between aggregation and diversity at engraved sites was found to be more complex. It was not Galt-Smith's intention to identify ritual behaviour but rather his research provided a means to identify different types of demographic movement in the past. The theoretical approach adopted by Galt-Smith, while identifying the form of rock art at sites where different types of aggregation and dispersion was recorded in ethnographic times, was not intended to address questions related to understanding *why* the rock art assemblage takes the particular form identified and *how* that form results from particular types of human behaviour. These questions will be central to this thesis.

By far the majority of rock art recording in central Australia over the past two decades has been commissioned by government agencies. The introduction of legislation such as the Commonwealth's *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*, and the Northern Territory Government's *Aboriginal Sacred Sites Act 1989* and *Northern Territory Heritage Conservation Act 1991*, recognised both the rights of Aboriginal

people to make decisions concerning their heritage and the obligations of governments to protect and conserve cultural sites. A number of recording programs have been instigated by the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory (CCNT), now the Parks and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory (PWCNT), within the parks and reserves they manage. Dick Kimber (1991) undertook a comprehensive survey of archaeological sites at Rainbow Valley detailing 58 separate sites including the engraved gorge and numerous painted rockshelters (see also Gunn 1995b). Paul Taçon (1992) documented the engraved assemblage at Roma Gorge, while Robert Worrall (1994) recorded the engravings in two smaller gorges to the east of Roma Gorge. Sarah Forbes (1992) recorded the engravings at N'Dhala Gorge and Andrée Rosenfeld completed two rock art surveys at Watarrka National Park (Rosenfeld 1990, Smith & Rosenfeld 1992). Ross Brown (1993, 1994) completed site recording and condition assessment reports for Ewaninga (see also Gunn 1989a) and Kuyunba (see also Gunn 1999b). Each report includes descriptions of the rock art although the parameters set for these surveys, in most cases, did not require further analysis (but see Forbes 1992 above; Smith & Rosenfeld 1992; Taçon 1994 below).

The Central Land Council, the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority in Alice Springs, and the Australian Heritage Commission and Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra have all funded rock art recording programs in the region, primarily aimed at identifying and recording sacred sites. The majority of these have been completed by R. G. (ben<sup>5</sup>) Gunn, for example, at Illararri (1988), Irtikiri (Gunn & Thorn 1997a) and Kulpi Maru (*Kulpi Mara* 1995d) on Tempe Downs Station, the Dulcie Range (1989b, 1992, 1993b, 1997b), Ewaninga (1989a), Ooraminna (1991b), Erota and Inangne (1991a), Keringke (1995c), Rainbow Valley (1995b), and *Akewlpe* (2001), all to the south and east of Alice Springs, *Therirrerte* (Therreyererte, 1993a) on the edge of the Simpson Desert, *Kwerlpe* (1994) and *Intertekwerle* (1998) in the James Range, Kuyunba (1999b), Emily, Jessie and Heavitree Gaps (1999a) close to Alice Springs and *Kulpitjata* (Gunn & Thorn 1997b) in the south west. These comprehensive reports provide a detailed database for a wide range of rock art assemblages across central Australia.

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<sup>5</sup> R. G. Gunn is known as 'ben' without a capital.

Importantly, Gunn has also included an ethnographic component in his reports. Working closely with Traditional Custodians, he has been able to document the Aboriginal significance of each site complex, including the sacred geography, mythological stories and totemic affiliations. While this information is restricted and therefore unavailable to researchers, Gunn (1997a, in prep) has published a generalised summary of the rock art and its spatial distribution that demonstrates the value of ethnographic knowledge both to rock art researchers and to those with a responsibility for the management of rock art assemblages. Gunn shows that the areas identified by custodians as 'symbolic sites', 'those cultural places that relate to a physical component in the landscape but which cannot be identified archaeologically' (Gunn 1997a:124) correspond closely with the visible archaeological sites. While the sacred significance may relate to a particular rock art motif or site, alternatively, the significance may have nothing to do with the rock art or any other archaeological evidence, but rather, may relate to non-archaeological aspects of the complex especially if the dominant *churinga ilkinia* motifs are not present (Gunn 1995a:125). The relationship between rock art and the natural and sacred features of each site has not been made explicit in much of the earlier anthropological research (but see K. Mulvaney 1993). For Aboriginal people today, rock art is only one of a number of sacred elements that may be present at any rock art complex.

The collection of ethnographic information enabled Gunn (1995a:125) to compare and elaborate on the relationship between rock art motifs and the totemic geography with that outlined by Spencer and Gillen a century earlier. He (in prep) found that each of the large, bi-chrome, geometric *churinga ilkinia* motifs recorded has been distinctly different in design from the others. Most appear as the most dominant motif within their respective shelters. They are found at one location within each clan estate, known as the *pmara kutata*, or principal totemic site where major ceremonies and rituals are known to have taken place (Strehlow 1947:112). It would appear from Gunn's research that despite considerable disruption to traditional life, knowledge relating to rock art assemblages is maintained in Aboriginal culture today, and rock art locations continue to hold significance for Aboriginal people in central Australia. However, it cannot be assumed that current interpretations provide the only possible

explanations for the patterns evident in rock art assemblages produced in the distant past in central Australia.

In addition to the ethnographic material, Gunn has developed syntheses of three archaeological aspects of his site recording. First, Gunn published two reports (1995a; 2000a) that synthesised his extensive database in order to characterise the Arnhem and Western Desert rock art assemblages. Results were obtained using quantitative analysis based on absolute frequencies of motif type, technique, size and colour (see Chapter 4 for a discussion on this approach). Second, he proposed a detailed relative rock art chronology for central Australia, as yet unpublished (see Chapter 6). He contended that the sequence is 'likely' to span 30,000 years, although resolution of the dating of each of his proposed phases awaits direct dating of the rock art itself or further excavated evidence. The relationship between the rock art assemblage described and the changes proposed in the chronology, and the past human behaviour responsible for them, provide fruitful areas for further investigation.

Most recently, Gunn (2002a) has identified spatial patterning in techniques of rock art production across ethnographically recorded linguistic boundaries. Gunn (2002a:116) related the variation between the spatial patterning of different techniques to geological factors (*cf.* Ross & Abbott, in press, Chapter 7), while acknowledging that the function of particular sections of the rock art assemblage may be reflected in the distribution patterns. More specifically, Gunn (2002a) and Thorley and Gunn (1996) attribute a boundary marking function to handstencil sites which he records as clustering in the north east and south west of the Central Ranges along current day linguistic boundaries. The authors do not elaborate on the ways in which stencils act as boundary markers, nor do they account for the role of handstencils elsewhere in the region away from present day boundaries. The ubiquitous nature of handstencils throughout central Australia suggests that the relationship between this part of the rock art assemblage and other rock art, and the contexts in which they are produced, should be further investigated.

On a broader spatial scale, the initial results of Gunn's (2002a) analyses undertaken to test Gould's conclusions on the relative richness and diversity of the Central and Western Desert pigment art show basic similarities between assemblages across both

regions. Differences identified by Gunn included a high concentration of tracks in the Western Desert while Arrernte art focuses on geometric designs. He attributed the variation to 'different physical and social environments' but did not elaborate on the nexus between the patterning of the art and the societies that produced it. Gunn's research has provided invaluable ethnographic accounts of rock art sites and a rich database of rock art recording from central Australia. There is now a need to build on Gunn's research (1995a, 2000a, 2002a) to find suitable theoretical approaches to *explain* the patterning he has identified in terms of past human behaviour.

A substantial proportion of rock art recording undertaken by Andréé Rosenfeld in central Australia was initiated for management purposes (Rosenfeld 1990, 1993, Smith & Rosenfeld 1992). In contrast to Gunn's quantitative methodology, Rosenfeld has undertaken detailed qualitative analyses from which her assemblage descriptions are formulated and explanations developed. Rosenfeld's research, especially that undertaken at Watarrka (Smith & Rosenfeld 1992) has set the foundations for the contextual approach utilised in this thesis. Her most detailed analysis was undertaken as part of a multidisciplinary study at Puritjarra, a large rockshelter on the western extremity of the central ranges (Rosenfeld & Smith 2002). Not only have Rosenfeld and Smith been able to propose a relative chronology based on patination and superimposition, but also they offered chronological parameters for the proposed sequence by comparing the rock art assemblage with excavated ochres that appear under the painted back walls about 13,000 years ago, then increase markedly around 800 years ago (see Chapter 6).

Rosenfeld (1997) has also published an overview of her research that includes data from rock art complexes at Watarrka, Wallace Rock Hole, Puritjarra and a number of other site complexes, mainly to the south or west of Alice Springs. Rosenfeld hypothesised, following Spencer and Gillen (1899:614), that two broad categories of rock art can be identified (1997:295; Rosenfeld & Smith 2002). The first category consists of track alignments, handstencils and a small number of formal motifs, is widespread and is usually found associated with evidence of occupation. The other category consists of formal motifs, generally of greater graphic complexity, which is the dominant (or only) art at a site (Rosenfeld & Smith 2002). Rosenfeld and Smith argued that each category of rock art functions in a different way. The first articulates

the daily economic and social geographies of groups and therefore occur in secular contexts in sites relating to habitual foraging ranges. Localities where the second category of formal motifs occur, on the other hand, may be mythologically powerful places that articulate the conceptual geography as well as political geography. Rosenfeld & Smith (2002) concluded that underlying this regional and functional variability of the rock art is a continuity of essential motif vocabulary that testifies to an enduring graphic tradition. This hypothesis, while suggesting a plausible explanation for the patterning of pigment rock art, is yet to be tested against the wider central Australian rock art assemblage. Nor does it incorporate the extensive engraved assemblage found throughout the region. These questions will be addressed in Chapters 6, 7 and 8.

Taçon (1994) suggested an additional 'social geography' based on the supposed spatial distribution of engravings at Roma Gorge in the West MacDonnell Ranges. Traditional Aboriginal Custodians working with Taçon in 1992 at the densely engraved site agreed that the boundary between two clan territories occurred at the waterhole at the head of a short waterfall about halfway up the gorge. Taçon erroneously (1992:54, 1994:119-20) identified an area totally free of engravings, 47 metres long, in this section of the gorge (*cf.* Chapter 4 for contrary archaeological evidence). Taçon had argued that by leaving this section of the gorge free of engravings, Aboriginal people had created a permanent pattern on the landscape, 'a social geography', marking out the boundaries of two clan territories by leaving an area free of rock art. With the location of engravings in the 'boundary zone' during this research, this argument can no longer be sustained. Such a 'marked' boundary in the engraved assemblage would have been particularly significant, as it would have indicated a considerable time depth for the ethnographically acknowledged clan boundaries, if we were to accept that the majority of engravings are of some antiquity as Taçon had estimated. While the investigation of the time depth of ethnographically recorded clan boundaries will not be addressed in this thesis, the relative chronology of aspects of rock art including the engraved assemblage will be investigated in Chapter 7.

### 3.5 Summary of the significance of previous research to thesis

The ethnography gathered in central Australia has emphasised the complexity of the visual art system: the same motif can encode many meanings at the same time; it can hold different meanings in different locales and can be sacred in one location or in one social context, but not in others. In recognising this complexity, it is evident that interpretation of individual motifs or parts of the assemblage is not possible from an archaeological perspective and that ‘informed explanations’ (Ucko 1977:16) must be sought if meanings are to be recovered.

Ethnographic accounts record a variety of functions for rock art in central Australia including prominent roles associated with ritual. Rock art was construed as being sacred, with origins from the *Alcheringa*; it functioned as a template for ritual body decoration; as an embodiment of the Ancestral Beings with which ritual performers interact during ceremony; and it was used as a token painted in recognition of the sacredness of the site. It was produced to depict a hunting narrative and, alternatively, as a form of sympathetic hunting magic to ensure success in attempts to spear game. Rock art was created as a didactic device to teach initiates and, more casually, as ‘play-work’ when no particular meaning or function is claimed. Although each of these functions was claimed for individual motifs or panels of motifs, it would seem to me that many of the attributes would not be mutually exclusive so that it is possible that several of these functions could be attributed to some motifs or assemblages at the same time.

Spencer and Gillen’s ethnographic explanations for parts of the *pigment* rock art assemblage have remained central to much of the rock art analyses undertaken in the region. Working with present day Aboriginal Custodians, Gunn (1997a, 2000a, in prep) proposed a range of characteristics by which *churinga ilkinia* can be identified, while Rosenfeld (1997; 2002) described two different pigment rock art assemblages, which she proposed were produced in differing social contexts. Neither of these explanations encompass the extensive engraved assemblages found throughout central Australia nor do ethnographic accounts document the role that this part of the assemblage might have played in the past. The relative chronology of the rock art

assemblage remains poorly understood and the relationship between the painted and engraved assemblages has not been explored.

While there are many detailed recordings of rock art at individual site complexes in central Australia, there remains a need to develop an understanding of rock art in a regional context. Following on from this, there is a need to develop a framework that incorporates rock art into a broader cultural and geographical context so that we can better understand the role that rock art played in past human societies in the arid zone. I will address these issues in this thesis.

Finally, both rock art research and ethnographic accounts suggest that some parts of the rock art assemblage played a role in negotiating interaction throughout the arid zone through information exchange in ritual or on ceremonial occasions. As yet there is no way that we can identify these aspects of the assemblage or assess the role that rock art may have played in such activities. In the following section, I will propose a theoretical framework developed from Roy Rappaport's extensive anthropological research on ritual; this framework aims to identify the structure and composition of the rock art assemblage that relates to ritual behaviour.

### **3.6 Rappaport's understanding of ritual**

Roy Rappaport had a long history of anthropological research in Highland Papua New Guinea, where he developed a broad interest in ritual. His final publication moved beyond the ecological functionalism that was central to much of his earlier research on ritual amongst the Maring (e.g. 1984; Robbins 2001), to concentrate on the 'unique entailments of ritual's form' (1999:31). In this, he presented a theoretical argument about the nature of ritual and religion in all human societies (see also Bloch 1977). Rappaport's most recent research aimed to broaden the understanding of ritual and religion in all human societies *and to isolate and illuminate the structural form that is common to all ritual*. It is this concern with the structure of ritual rather than with the content of individual rituals that makes his research so pertinent to the archaeological investigation of rock art. I have used this approach to identify ritual elements in central Australian rock art. This will enable me to argue that ritual was one social context in which rock art was produced and, most significantly, to establish

the *relationship between ritual behaviour and rock art*. Ritual behaviour, however, will not necessarily provide an explanation for all rock art across the region.

Rappaport (1999:24-26) defined ritual as ‘the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers’ and argued that while this definition is broad and inclusive it never-the-less gives primacy to the ‘*features common to rituals always and everywhere*’. Significantly, as this definition is to be related to a body of mostly prehistoric rock art where meaning cannot be retrieved, the definition ‘does not stipulate what ritual is “about” or what its “for”’. Rappaport (1999: 26) contended that the definition identifies not only the elements of ritual but also stipulates *enduring relations or structure* among these features. He emphasised that while ‘none of the elements constituting the structure are unique to ritual, the relations among them are’. If this unique ritual structure can then be identified in some parts of the central Australian rock art assemblage, it will be possible to draw conclusions about the contexts in which this rock art was produced.

Some additional explanations of the terms and concepts outlined in the definition of ritual are required. While Rappaport supported his definition with detailed discussion on what does *not* constitute ritual, I will focus here only on the identifiable forms of ritual. First, the definition stipulates that the performers of rituals do not specify all the acts and utterances constituting their own performances. ‘They follow, more or less punctiliously, *orders established or taken to have been established by others*’ (Rappaport 1999:32, my emphasis). Commonly, ritual actions are those that are sanctioned or canonised, in the view of the participants, by supernatural powers (Rappaport 1999:38). The fact that these actions were *evidently* established by others, who are not present, makes a supernatural explanation more plausible.

Second, Rappaport (1999:33) described the constituting elements of the ritual as ‘formal acts’ and explained that ‘ritual sequences are composed of conventional, even stereotyped elements’ such as ‘stylised and often decorous gestures and postures and the arrangement of these elements in time and space are more or less fixed’. That is, they are regularly repeated at specified times at special places. The emphasis here is on behaviour that displays decreasing spontaneity and increasing formality.

Third, Rappaport (1993:36) deemed it necessary to add the phrase, 'more or less', to the definition of ritual as he allowed that a certain amount of variation is inevitable through time with the preference, introduction, rearrangement or discard of elements by performers undertaking rituals. The acceptance of the inevitability of some change does not detract from the central importance of the concept of invariance in Rappaport's definition. He concluded that the notion that the essential aspects of ritual were being maintained was always a consideration of those participating. The centrality of the concept of invariance in ritual was explained by Rappaport (1999:41): 'ritual displays or even flaunts its invariance, for in its very invariance it manifests or represents a *specific* order to which individuals *ipso facto* conform in performing them'.

Finally, the term, 'acts', implies that ritual differs from such things as myth in that *performance* is an intrinsic element. Ritual is not an object or an outcome but an activity undertaken by human performers and the 'manner of saying or doing is intrinsic to what is being "said" and "done"' (Rappaport 1999:38, see also Finnegan 1969; La Fontaine 1977). Further, not only are performers involved in ritual activity, there are likely to be others present at proceedings and these people will *participate* in proceedings rather than being separated as a passive audience or as spectators with no influence on the outcome of proceedings. The roles of participants in ritual, however, may be highly differentiated and preordained and potentially, participants 'may leave the ritual performance with their statuses in some way formally transformed' (Rappaport 1999:39-40).

To summarise, the features of the structure that Rappaport identified in ritual are:

- 1) invariance
- 2) repetition
- 3) specialised time
- 4) specialised place
- 5) stylised behaviour/stylised form
- 6) performance and participation
- 7) form which can hold and transfer a canonised message

If rock art were an integral part of ritual as has been suggested for the central Australian assemblage, I hypothesise that a number of the features outlined by Rappaport and listed above should be evident in the structure of the assemblage.

Rappaport (1999:51) viewed ritual as a form of communication and argued that, as such, its role in a given culture must be studied in tandem with other means of communication (see also Robbins 2001:592) in order to identify factors that are specific to each although the role art of any type might have played in ritual was largely ignored by Rappaport. Rock art is the form of communication with which archaeologists concerned with hunter-gatherer societies are most familiar (see definition Chapter 1). Rappaport's research has provided the theory from which I have formulated a hypothesis that the ritual form of rock art can be identified.

In considering ritual as a form of communication, Rappaport identified two types of messages conveyed. The first type is 'self-referential' and as such 'concerns the current physical, psychic or social states of the performers' (Rappaport 1999:53). Information conveyed can relate to individual participants or to groups involved. The messages communicated are related to the here and now of the ritual and are conveyed using what Rappaport, following Peirce (e.g.1986), called indexical signs or indices. Rappaport (1999:55) described an index as 'perceptible aspects of events or conditions signifying the presence or existence of imperceptible aspects of the same events or conditions'. In this way, a rash indicates the measles or smoke indicates a fire. For example, in ritual it may be that if a person is leading the singing, this *indicates* that she is the senior woman, or it may be that the bestowal of gifts *indicates* that the obligations of reciprocity are being acknowledged by the giver. The status or relationship of the individual or group is *demonstrated*. Self-referential messages concern the immediate, particular vital aspects of events (Rappaport 1999:53).

The second type of message conveyed in ritual has been labelled, 'canonical' by Rappaport (1999:52-55). Canonical messages, while transmitted by ritual participants, are not encoded by them. Rather, they are invariant messages about the nature of the world that participants take from ritual order and beliefs and are concerned with nature, society or the cosmos and are not confined to the present or to a physical space. Hence, this type of message represents 'the general, enduring, or

even eternal aspects of *universal orders*' (1999:53, emphasis in original). Canonical messages are carried by the invariant aspects of ritual which, because of their abstract nature, can only be founded upon *symbols*. Symbols as defined by Rappaport (1999:54) are 'signs associated by law or convention with that which they signify'.

If, as has been hypothesised, rock art was associated with ritual, the motifs would provide ideal 'symbols' in which to convey the canonical messages identified by Rappaport. But just as it is not possible to recover the meaning of individual rock art motifs, it will not be possible to interpret the canonical message in an archaeological context; such meanings must, by definition, be learnt by convention. Neither are self-referential messages carried in indices likely to leave an archaeologically identifiable signature except in the broadest terms. Rappaport (1999:31) concluded that:

'it seems apparent ...that ritual is not simply an alternate way to express any manner of thing, but that certain meanings and effects can best, or even *only*, be achieved in ritual. Ritual is without equivalents or even ... satisfactory alternatives. Ritual is an act basic to humanity'.

If, as Rappaport claims, 'ritual is an act basic to humanity', a theory which provides the means to identify ritual in rock art assemblages from hunter-gatherer societies will be far reaching and will provide the means to develop an understanding of the ways rock art was used in such activities. Rappaport is not alone in recognising ritual form (see e.g. Bloch 1986; Smith 1987) but for the purposes of clarity, I have avoided lengthy discussion over particulars of the form that ritual takes and based my model on Rappaport's research.

One distinctive form of ritual that has been promoted in rock art studies is that associated with shamanism. I believe my theoretical framework based on Rappaport's research has a number of advantages over Lewis-Williams (2001) and Lewis-Williams and Dowson's (1988) approaches formulated to identify shamanism. Lewis-Williams (2001:338) neuropsychological model recognises three stages of trance which people, including shamans, can experience. A different range of vision or motif types is experienced by the subjects in each stage, becoming increasingly complex and culturally conditioned. While it is probable, as Lewis-Williams argued (2001:339), that all people no matter what their cultural backgrounds have the

potential to experience these same stages of trance, he also concedes 'that particular cultural emphases' lead trance subjects to value some visualised forms and to ignore others (Noble & Davidson 1993). If we accept that this is the case, it becomes difficult to be specific about the particular motif range that is likely to be experienced as significant in each trance state. Therefore identification of shamanism based on motif types, even if all three stages are represented (Lewis-Williams 2001:341) (and assuming we can establish that the motifs are contemporaneous), could be unreliable even when context is taken into account. In contrast, the ritual behaviour model I have outlined above relies on the identification of a *universal structure* within the art assemblage rather than a range of particular motif forms that Lewis-Williams concedes are culturally mediated. The ritual behaviour model therefore avoids the problem of cultural specificity.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

The extensive pigment and engraved assemblage of central Australia will provide an ideal database from which to investigate the hypothesised ritual structure identified from Rappaport's research.

The following chapter will outline the research design and define the categories recorded for the database. A large number of categories were included on the database so that the structure and form of the assemblage outlined in the theoretical framework could be identified. In addition, categories incorporating cultural and geographic data from locations where rock art is found provide the contextual data needed to address the thesis questions.