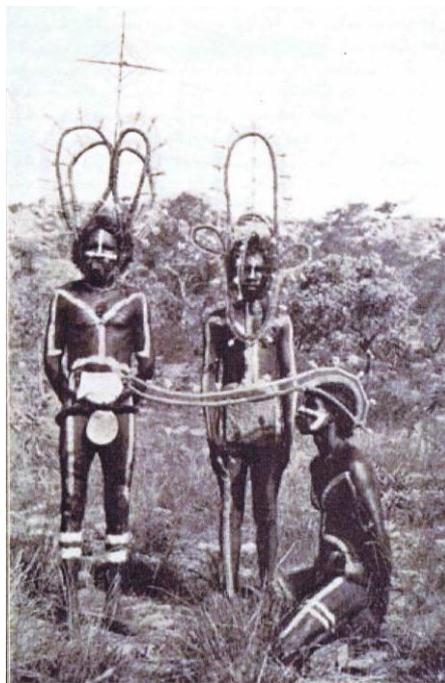


Butcher Joe Nangan: an introduction.

Philippa Jahn and Brigid Drummond

The conditions for an Aboriginal aesthetic are the conditions for living with the possibility for expansion and transformation, always moving slightly beyond recognition, allowing critics and traders the glimpse of a secret which is both profound and as candidly open as the country in which we walk.ⁱ



Early photograph of Nangan (right) wearing Mayarta headdressⁱⁱ

Much like his ethereal depictions of Dreaming narratives, Nyikina man Butcher Joe Nangan is something of an elusive figure, particularly in the mainstream art world. Perhaps this is because his work defies definition, resists the categorisation so loved by art historians, or perhaps simply because many of the drawings and paintings he produced for others slightly pre-dated the efflorescence of attention paid to Kimberley art in the 1980s. He has always had, however, a staunch group of aficionados; anthropologists, linguists, musicologists, missionaries and collectors who treasured his depth of knowledge, commitment to cultural preservation both within and without his own culture, as well as the gentle sensibility of his artwork.

Like many Kimberley people Nangan was, by birth, kinship and residence affiliated with a number of cultural groups in a broad area of the Kimberley. He was born at Kanen in Yawuru country on the northern shores of Roebuck Bay near Broome around 1902, and spent his childhood and much of his adult life in the west Kimberley. His father, Dicky Djulba, was a Walmajarra man from Paliara in the desert country much further east. His mother however, Anne Binmarring, was Nyikina. She was from the beautiful and varied terrain of Jirrkaliy Creek north of the Edgar Ranges.ⁱⁱⁱ

It was this maternal ancestral country to which he turned for his primary cultural identity. Perhaps this was linked to the fact that Nangan lost both his parents in his youth, at the time of the Mowla Bluff massacre of 1916. This event, the memory of which is kept alive by the Nyikina today, resulted from a reprisal attack by pastoralists against a large number of people in the vicinity of Jirrkaliy Creek.^{iv} At the time Nangan was away working at a stock camp, and therefore was one of the few to survive. It is likely this event contributed to his sense of a deep responsibility to keep the cultural knowledge of his country and kin alive later in life, particularly as exemplified by the body of artwork he left behind.

Much of Nangan's adult life was spent as a stockman working at various sheep and cattle stations in the west Kimberley. He walked with a limp, endowment of these years of hard riding far from good medical care. The name 'Butcher Joe' was acquired during a period later spent working as a butcher in Broome and Beagle Bay, where he moved after marrying a local woman. These basic biographical details however do not indicate the depth of his connection to life as a cultural leader, singer, dancer, dreamer-poet, Lawman and *Maparn* (healer, 'Clever Man'). The determination to preserve and pass on this life-long accumulation of cultural wisdom and knowledge of country and story in the face of inevitable change, shared with a group of whitefellas willing to learn and support this drive, resulted in the focused development of an archive of around six hundred pencil drawings and watercolours produced over some three decades.



Butcher Joe Nangan, *Untitled*, 1982, black pencil and watercolour, 27 x 37 cm, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

Aside from the personal memories and knowledge of his extended family, much of what is known about Nangan now comes from the documentation compiled by these researchers and associates. Some of this material is published and readily available for interested readers. Whilst background material has been drawn from these sources, this essay will instead rest on the memories of Nangan's granddaughter Brigid Drummond to draw a more intimate picture, before taking a closer look at the artworks themselves from an art historical rather than ethnographic perspective.

Brigid grew up with her mother, grandparents and two brothers at Beagle Bay (then a mission community). They lived at the little settlement for Christianised families on the outskirts of the mission known, in a curious semantic inversion which permitted these families to be settlers of their own land, as 'the colony'. She was

known as a 'colony girl', as opposed to the 'dormitory kids' cared for largely by the Catholic Sisters and male missionaries. Her maternal forebears were Nyul Nyul people from the country where the mission was first established as a Trappist outpost in 1895. They are descendants of Nyul Nyul leader King Felix, whose land was selected to be the site of the (now renowned) Beagle Bay church. Her grandmother was Josephine Balgalai, whom Nangan married after his first wife died. Together they had just one child, Brigid's mother Mary Joseph.

Brigid recounts a happy childhood growing up with her brother Louis. Her *Nyami*, grandfather Butcher Joe, was a particularly influential figure when she was young. The family would often go fishing and hunting outside the mission on weekends (sometimes taking 'dormitory kids' with them). They would all sleep on big sheets of canvas on the ground by a fire, and before the children drifted off *Nyami* would so enthrall them with Dreaming stories they would fight for the privileged position of sleeping by his side. Brigid says whenever they were out bush, *Nyami* would always be talking to the old people now gone. He always told them how important this was, to never forget what their ancestors did for them.



Butcher Joe Nangan. *Rainmakers with Riitji*, c. 1979, black pencil and watercolour, 16 x 24.5 cm. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

When Brigid was about six years old she remembers making a trip with her family to *Nyami's* country, to Jirrkaliy Creek on Dampier Downs station. This trip was with 'Nora' (likely to have been linguist Nora Kerr who was researching in Broome with BJ in 1967/8). Brigid remembers that her grandfather made everybody wash themselves in a waterhole, to introduce them to the sacred Rainbow Serpent there. She remembers watching the water level gently rising and falling, and *Nyami* explaining to her that this was the serpent breathing. They all collected lots of different coloured ochres to bring home for body painting for *Nurlu* (public song and dance performance).



Butcher Joe Nangan, *Wadmulla and Pintja Pintja (Spirits and Butterfly)*, 1982-83, black pencil and watercolour, 27 x 36.5 cm, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

She says that the *Bugarigarre* (Dreaming) was his life, waking and sleeping he was imbued with that world. He made sure his grandchildren knew where they came from, and taught them that everything in life was important; all people, the land, all the animals and plants. He said they should always be respectful, and nurture the earth. He was often overheard talking to the animals, insects and plants and used to say if you need anything, just ask them for it. If you caught a fish or an animal (and you only took what you needed), you should always thank them.



Butcher Joe Nangan. *Wilarmintj - Blue Mountain Parrot*, c. 1979, black pencil and watercolour, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

He was compassionate and kind, and always mindful of others. In Brigid's words he was a funny old fellow too. He loved cowboy and Indian films; if there were black cockatoos about he would get the kids to ask them if there was one due to be screened at the next community film night, and if they squawked back he would know the answer.

Brigid remembers him dreaming new songs and dances. As soon as he woke up he would repeat the songs to retain them - she remembers him lying on his back, one leg propped up on the other, singing and beating a rhythm on his tobacco tin with a pen-knife. Sometimes he tapped boomerangs together for rhythm instead, as occurred during performance of *Nurlu*. He always wanted Brigid to come and listen to the new songs, but he had a very powerful, loud voice and she would tell him to quieten down. He was patient though, and she was a good girl and listened, but admits with a laugh now that she thought the songs all sounded the same.

Nyami encouraged Brigid to sit with him when he was drawing and painting. She and her younger brother Louis had jobs to help him – they would lay out his papers, or pearl shell if was carving, and set up his brushes, pencils, water and paints. Louis would tap the old ashes out of his pipe and fill it with fresh tobacco. They would then sit next to him to watch and listen to him explain the stories he was depicting. He also liked to talk to the old ones who had passed away while he drew. Louis would run off quickly, but Brigid was interested and would be patient for a while, until she too ran off to play. *Nyami* wanted them close, but wouldn't tolerate being bumped, or his equipment being played with, or any humbug or noise from them while he was working. Sometimes he would encourage them to draw with him, but they weren't allowed to use his good pencils or paints, and were given his discarded paper to use.



Butcher Joe Nangan, *Kantjiba*, 1982-83, black pencil and watercolour, 27 x 36.5 cm, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

Brigid thinks her grandfather enjoyed talking to the visiting researchers who tracked him down, and that these interactions were positive experiences for him. She remembers him also spending many hours talking to elderly Father Francis (Franz Hügel) at Beagle Bay, and that he even occasionally visited the church for special events. Perhaps he found something of a kindred spirit in this man, also with strong spiritual inclinations and far from home and extended family. Later in life, after his second wife died and his daughter moved away from Beagle Bay, he moved permanently to Broome where he was cared for by the Roe family. As a young man he had developed strong connections with them and had always been particularly close to Nyikina cultural leader Paddy Roe.

Such is a selection of the fond memories of Nangan's grand-daughter, but is it possible to step beyond these details of the life of the man to a sense of the spirit of the drawings? Or perhaps this question should be

inverted, to suggest that a full appreciation of the drawings hinges on a sensitive response to Nangan's life and social and cultural priorities.

Researchers were drawn to Nangan for his vast repertoire of cultural knowledge – Helmut Petri, Peter Dalton, linguist Nora Kerr, Pallottine missionary Father Frank Hügel, author Hugh Edwards, ethnographer/linguist Stephen Muecke, anthropologist Kim Akerman and art dealer Mary Macha all feature prominently in the story of Nangan's engagement with non-Aboriginal Australians, and all were deeply touched by him. The first seems to have been German anthropologist Petri, who met him at Beagle Bay in 1938 and later worked with him in the mid-50s when he obtained drawings and paintings. It is not known whether these were amongst the first naturalistic works on paper Nangan produced, though Petri believed this to be so. Certainly Petri was primed to encourage the translation of his mythological stories into artwork, as he had already obtained drawings from men in the LaGrange mission area, as well as painted barks produced by informants in the north Kimberley decades earlier. Nangan was the first of these, however, to develop a signature naturalistic style. Perhaps this was a refinement of the process of conveying a complex Aboriginal ontology to a western mind. However his facility for illustrating in this way and passion for his subject matter suggests that this was not his only motivation.

Petri himself was not the first to employ this research method with Aboriginal cultural informants. He is likely to have heard of the ethnographic studies undertaken by Daisy Bates around 1907 in the Broome and Beagle Bay areas, and particularly her collaboration with Broome man Billinge, which resulted in several sketchbooks filled with vibrant pencil illustrations of aspects of local life and material culture. Many of these have also been drawn using a degree of naturalism, hardly surprising for a number of reasons. Firstly, evidence from early collections of portable Kimberley cultural material, particularly boab nuts and pearl shell, indicates that styles of engraved embellishment began to include increasingly naturalistic figurative elements from the early days of settlement, particularly as such objects quickly became collectible to Kimberley newcomers, available to be exchanged or sold and therefore one of the few points of entry into the new cash economy available to local people. Figuration itself was not a new development, as the rock art of the area attests, however early experiments with perspective and realism evidently grew in a cross-cultural milieu where a visual language had entry where a spoken language did not.



Butcher Joe Nangan, engraved pearl shell. Photo courtesy of the Broome Historical Society

Petri probably wasn't responsible for encouraging this particular style in Nangan; although there is no firm evidence yet that the natural realism of Nangan's works on paper was earlier being used on the boab nuts and pearl shell he was known to engrave, it is very likely. Other accomplished engravers in the west Kimberley, such as Jack Wherra, Biggie Albert and Lockie Nollier, had been utilising it for some time. Dating and ascribing authorship to these earlier pieces is difficult, yet it is probable that Nangan's facility for drawing and his signature style began to be developed during a prior period of embellishing objects more readily available.

Where Nangan diverges from the artwork of his peers however, is in his particular combination of style and subject matter. He rarely drew secular themes, instead depicting narratives and characters from the Dreaming almost exclusively. In this he is unique; in contemporary times Aboriginal artists working figuratively have chosen to use traditional styles for classical subject matter (Kimberley artist Ngarra for example), or a western style of natural realism for secular themes (Jack Wherra), but not the opposite. Perhaps this explains why some first-time viewers don't take his drawings very seriously, as if they were merely charming sketches of fairy tales. This is to underestimate the subtle power of the work and their back-stories (both mythological and biographical) however, as well as their place at the very core of the artist's heart and world view.



Butcher Joe Nangan. *Piwit Driven off by his Mother*, c. 1979, black pencil and watercolour, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Drawing on paper probably offered Nangan a certain freedom beyond the limitations of pearl shell and boab nut (although he continued to incise these after taking up drawing and painting). The ability to express a story using a larger surface area and shades of colour enabled explorations of distance perspective for example, rare in traditional Aboriginal styles of figuration. He also exploited shadow and tonal variation, and 3/4 profiles to indicate three-dimensionality. But as if to pre-empt the perception that these were secular illustrations, he never covered the entire sheet of paper, preferring to let his Dreaming subjects come together as in the Dreaming, floating in the centre of the work unfettered by time or space.



Butcher Joe Nangan. *Kantjiba*, 1982-83, black pencil and watercolour, 27 x 36.5 cm, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

The characters in his works, whether animal or human (and the two are emblematic of transmutation in many instances) are central, somewhat unusually for an artist working with traditional subject matter where symbols of country are often foregrounded, sometimes doubling for the dreaming beings which are symbiotically entwined with it. Nangan inhabits the dynamism of these beings in his artworks, enlivening them for viewers with individualised form and personality. They are by turns dark or comical; mischievous, despairing, enraged or incredulous, enacting the Dreaming narratives on which human lessons in religious philosophy and social behaviour rest.

As his grand-daughter attests, these beings were very real for him; he slipped into Dreaming consciousness readily. According to Kim Akerman:

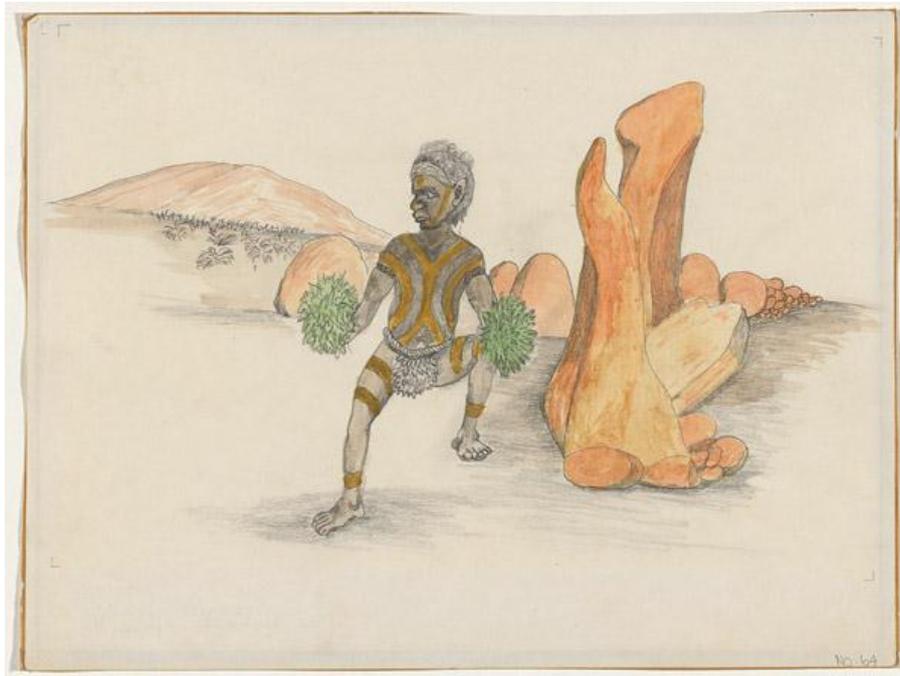
He regularly experienced spirit visitations in the course of his dreams. In the mid-1920s, during one such visitation, the spirit of his dead 'aunt' Kintimayi emerged from her grave at Wayikurrkurr at Dampier Downs. The spirit bestowed the pelican being, *Mayarta*, upon Joe as a personal *jalnga* or spirit familiar and taught him the *marinji-rinji nulu*, a dance depicting the transformational processes by which spirits of the dead may reveal themselves and communicate benevolently with the living.^v



Butcher Joe Nangan. *Mayata - the Pelican*, c1979, black pencil and watercolour, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

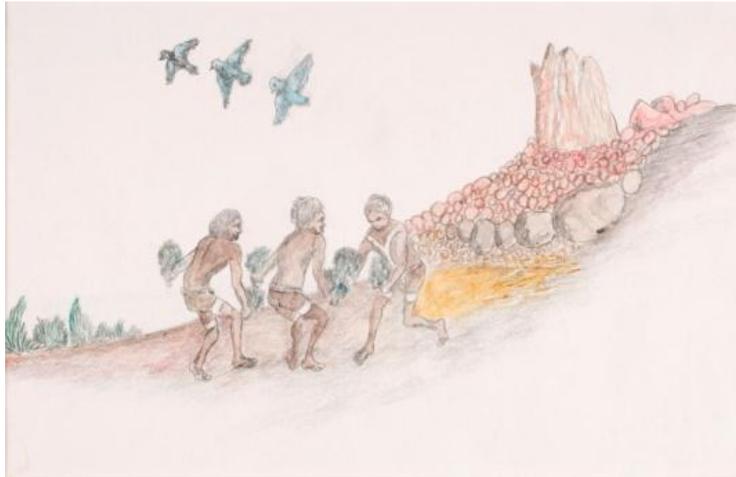
Illustrating the esoteric in this way for researchers and visitors to his country enabled them to glimpse one dimension at least of this intangible aspect of Nangan's life, without necessarily revealing the deeper layers of meaning these stories can hold. Nangan himself used a mnemonic device as a clue to which stories were being illustrated; a tiny animal or insect in the bottom right corner of drawings functioned as a key to theme of each work. It's tempting to view these miniatures as a kind of signature, with the purpose of ensuring the endurance of the story rather than the artist. But unfortunately, in a move which completes the uncoupling of the artwork from its socio-cultural origins as it enters the mainstream art market, this detail was sometimes cut off when pages of his sketchbooks were separated by collectors unaware of their significance. The opportunity to link the artwork with its transcribed explanation is lost for many of these works.

Nangan could draw many iterations of the same story, hence the value of these mnemonics. In these repetitions he was mirroring the re-telling of story, song and dance which kept narratives alive across generations, the essence of the story remaining the same yet inflected by individual expression. His style is also reminiscent of performance; many of his keen depictions of human and animal movement and facial expression bring to mind the drama of public song and dance ceremony in the Kimberley. His figures are always interacting and his compositions rarely static; he fully exploited the rhythmic potential of curves and diagonals to imply action both within and beyond the drawn image.



Butcher Joe Nangan. *Tjitjingnatirr- the Ant Bed Spirits*, c. 1979, black pencil and watercolour, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Nangan used colour judiciously. It's possible he occasionally ran out of watercolour or coloured pencil, but there seems to be a logic behind his choices. He mostly used a soft lead pencil to delicately outline, shade and add texture, reserving brighter colours or soft washes for the features he wished to highlight – body paint, weaponry, creatures and vegetation in particular. Rocks were also treated to a light earthy wash. These have their own special place in the artworks; often identified rocks in specific places, they are mute participants in the drama unfolding on the paper, oddly fecund shapes hinting at an inner life animated by the Dreaming.



Butcher Joe Nangan, *Rai meeting*, 1982-83, black pencil and watercolour, 27 x 36.5 cm, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

Brigid would like her grandfather to be remembered not only for his legacy to future generations, but also his stature as a man. 'He was a person of few words but what he did say meant a lot – he was wise, connected, and emotional'. Unfortunately it is difficult for family and other west Kimberley people to access his artwork as so little of his extensive artistic output remains there. Whilst he doubtless knew that the researchers he worked closely with would honour his hope for cultural preservation, and indeed collections and documentation of his vast cultural knowledge are held at a number of institutions nationally, he might not have anticipated this outcome for those closest to him.

Nangan's pencil lines were always gentle, provisional even, as if coaxing out an image already immanent in the paper. Towards the end of his life the pencil marks became less distinct, the colour softer, possibly as his eyesight and steady hand weakened. Thirty years after he left the material world his legacy is the energy of a man still pulsating life through his drawings, subject and object finally indistinguishable; two-dimensional representations of the rising and falling waters of the sacred Nyikina waterhole. The grave of Butcher Joe Nangan OAM can be found in the Broome cemetery, under a casuarina tree. Mary Macha organised a bronze plaque for him. Small letters gleam in the shade:

'bookarri karraniyi yinnmin agayoo liyan'
'that dreamtime it gave me my life'



Butcher Joe Nangan in Mayarta headdress. Photo © Roger Garwood

Thanks to Roger Garwood for the generous permission to include his memorable photograph of Nangan on the final page. Also to the National Gallery of Australia and the Broome Historical Society for the contribution of additional images.

ⁱ S Muecke 1988, 'Two Texts and One Other', in A. Rutherford, *Aboriginal Culture Today*, Dangaroo Press, Sydney, p. 57-8.

ⁱⁱ Thanks to Kim Akerman for this lead, and his description stating Nangan is 'wearing a *Mayarta* (pelican) headdress, part of the costume for a *nurlu* (song cycle) he composed after a visitation from the spirit of his dead 'mother's sister' – a woman called Kintimayi.' Image from W Robertson 1928, *Bringa's Cooe Talks*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/nangan-joseph-butcher-joe-14981>, accessed 07/05/2016.

^{iv} In 2000 a monument was placed at this site by the Nyikina, Mangala & Karrajarri people; the plaque reads: *This site acknowledges the massacre of the Nyikina, Mangala and Karrajarri people in 1916. The massacre took place near Geegully Creek close to Mowla Bluff station after a beating of a pastoralist took place. In 1918 a police enquiry in Broome concealed the truth about the killings. The Mowla Bluff incident was closed and forgotten by the authorities but never forgotten by us, and is supported by the evidence in the 1918 enquiry. This plaque is in memory of all our family members who had their lives taken away in the massacre.*

^v K Akerman 2004, in Australian National University Institute for Indigenous Australia, & W. Caruana (ed.), *Likan'mirri-Connections: The AIATSIS Collection of Art: an Exhibition at the ANU Drill Hall Gallery*, Australian National University Institute for Indigenous Australia, p. 40.