

The Big Rattle

by

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As we approach the finale of this series of articles, I must profess, that in truth I know little of Rembarrnga notions of Gurralangga, Mijindah, Gunungu, or indeed; Barnumbirr. I have never been properly tutored, initiated into, nor lived these concepts and places that are foundational to the notion of a Rembarrnga Dreaming; or as Fordham paraphrases it as "In the Beginning".

I may have sat in the public bar of Rembarrnga culture with Paddy over a random number of heady sessions but never, ever have I been into the inner sanctum of the members club. Forever the outsider. To illustrate, my good friend of many years, Alfred Rickson of Weemol, once answered my irritating inquiries as to Wybalk¹ country place names, by slowly explaining to me that every Rembarrnga boy to man has to go through six initiations in Country to even be entitled to say such place names with familiarity. He finished his reply by looking at me in his quiet, enquiring fashion; as I stubbornly, stumbled verbally over yet another place name. A silence ensued.

Fortunately, however, Old Man Fordham was more tolerant of my questionable company, and as such, he gifted so much public knowledge of Rembarrnga history and lore, that this now amounts to a significant data base. In synchronicity with my own awakening over the years, I have seen the apparently random jigsaw pieces slowly begin to align, interlocking forming part images in my minds-eye. Some pieces don't fit cleanly, others perhaps don't belong at all. But it does form a patchy mosaic, not unlike the tiled floor of an ancient excavated Roman townhouse. The origins the Rembarrnga tribe albeit much older. The influences and confluences upon the formation of this distinct first nations people. The story of the Rembarrnga.

The keystone artwork to this cosmic story, occurred in 2003. **First Rain to the Rembarrnga People**, he considered it the most important of our working relationship. Perhaps the seminal piece of our partnership, its scope is broad indeed.

He said,

*This is from the beginning. Its rain to the first people, us mob. Rembarrnga, from generations ago. **Ngnalk Njugala** – rainwater from God.*

First rain from God for the first time came to my people.

All the animals after, everything came after.

Rain made everything. Ref. First Rain to the Rembarrnga discourse.

¹ Ancestral homelands for the Mirraitja clan.



194 03 pl 125*204cm First Rain to the Rembarrnga People

The artwork is a considered and deliberate compositional piece. He did not create it for me or the money, not AASTIA² accolades, not even art's sake; but for his clan. From his heart, he clearly stated his motivation

I record it for the Mirraitja People of Middle Arnhem Land and their children. This recording is for Aboriginal People and the Rembarrnga Tribe, Mirraitja People. Mirraitja People from the grandpa³ side.

That's where it was learnt from. Mirraitja People, all the Mosquito People.

Following that, he set the context for the work with an emphatic declaration as to an indigenous man's identity in the modern world. Contrasted against the simplicity of his given whitefella name, he presents his true totemic blackfella name, with all its overt and implied moiety, skin, family, kinship, and clan affiliations. Though not quite a rejection of his white moniker, it is most importantly an affirmation of his forever aboriginality in the face of dramatic and tumultuous change over his own lifetime.

Whiteman way, you call me Paddy Fordham⁴, but I'm a Wainburranga, I'm a Gela, Mirraitja Group. My children, my nephew, my niece they the Gojok and Gotjan. My sister mob they Galijan. Belljain is my grandfather. Mirraitja People that means like I'm Gela. Then Wamut people is my father, or Duwa people.

The event happened in country...

*That place name now **Gullarjult**.*

A record its transmogrification to heaven....

The heaven and its shadow on earth.

*Milky way **Gulalanga**. ...The river in the sky, he the Black Head Python. That's the place now.*

From Dreamtime, even the Brolga was a human being. Ibis was human being. No matter what bird, they were Aboriginal before. They were us mob. Rembarrnga before everybody else. This is for the Central Arnhem Land no matter what you are.

Ref. First Rain to the Rembarrnga discourse.

Broadly speaking, **First Rain to the Rembarrnga People** is the pictorial narrative of a cataclysmic moments in Rembarrnga history, when, in the instant of the "big rattle" (**bukkarrookum**), people were transfigured into stars, as their allegorical god Gunungu, sent by "Grandpapa God", descended to Gullarjult, consumed the people. Flooding the entire land; it regenerated anew and

² Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award. First Rain to the Rembarrnga People, Exhibited 2003.

³ Fordhams generic reference to the original forebear of his clan.

⁴ Paddy Fordham was the name given to him by the Fordham family who managed Gorrie Station. As a young man with a troublesome reputation and increasing interactions with the justice system, he was placed with the Family by the Police Sargent of the time.

the Rembarrnga nation with its new allies emerged, to live by, forever more, by the prevailing moral code - the moiety system. The “*first true people*” were born, the Balang-jarr-ngalans, aka the Rembarrnga People.

Before “the moment”, Fordham prefaces what it was like in this chaotic fresh world. Small fractured family groups cannibalising others. No lore, culture nor kinship united the people.

Before this, it was empty area. They had nothing then, it was dry and empty. They used to move from place to place. Sit down where the big caves are. They didn't sit down in one place. Ref. First Rain to the Rembarrnga discourse.

They were starving people there were other people, they did eat one and another. Everywhere, rock people all the desert people, all the different tribes they were cannibals. And there were different tribes that were good people too. Half make himself into skin group (moiety system), the other half walk around no skin. Walk around with nobody knowing each other. He would know his family but other people he didn't know them. Just kill them, take them back and eat them. God punished them. Ref. First Rain to the Rembarrnga discourse.

One side were good people, on side were no good people. But us mob from the Beginning, we never ate one another. They just stay in one place, their country. Yes, that's where we stay, where we got our own ideas, we got out own problems, our own history. Ref. First Rain to the Rembarrnga discourse.

A large canvas. Highly figurative, highly animated.

The entirety of the artwork depicts a specific place over a number of timeframes. The artist has mapped out three distinct story panels that sit between two distinct black bands (top & bottom), these represent heaven and earth both visually, figuratively and allegorical. They are one and the same. Indeed, the convergence, and then divergence of these two elements will eventually lead to an accretion of the Rembarrnga heaven. Now, within the vast, infinite Gurralangga, there exists the Mirraitjja celestial homeland (*ref 250 04 All the Birds*). Whilst on earth, between the top and bottom bands also live the Mirraitjja Clan of the Rembarrnga Nation.

From heaven, descended an omnipresent, stark arrangement of black and white (top of canvas). The low brooding formation of clouds, portends a transformational moment in the ceremony. Converging and clashing of thunder caps, heralds an immense storm. Chaos and lightening. The deluge. “The big flood”.



*From the dead people to the public ceremony, **Maddayrin**, to the children for learning. **Gukgarlmin Darldarlmun**. White one and black one, they came to us. Ref. First Rain to the Rembarrnga discourse.*



Scanning the central panel, one can soon locate the Duwa songman. Leader of the ceremony. A giant. The singer towers above all others, he has more power, more authority. Fordham sees himself thus, performing the crucial role of songman that will bring the rains for the first time. He is the one “...I got more than one thousand songs. Too many.”

The big mimih is the songman, he is the one that leads the song. When the rain comes you can see it hit their bodies. That’s the decoration and the rain hitting them⁵. Ref First Rain to the Rembarrnga People discourse.

⁵ At last, a coherent reason as to why Fordham has never used **raak** body decoration in his works. He paints the way his father taught him. Dots (the rain) predominant in his artwork with articulated ceremony lines around form. “... **That’s the decoration and the rain hitting them.**”

He reiterates from whence his authority is inherited.

We all the same body of our grand grandpa from long time ago. We same.....right up to today. Ref First Rain to the Rembarrnga People discourse.

Through the body of his great great grand grandfather, and his totemic mosquitoes that shepherd and protect the two moieties together as one, the Mirraitjja clan begin to exert their ceremonial control over their unruly, chaotic, fresh new world. The elements and ceremony, build to an intensity; a looming crescendo, fast approaches.

The big rattle! **Bukkarrookum!** The blackhead python consumes the ceremony with the world. Earth-shaking to world-shattering as the corroboree of people and creatures are transformed into stars of the night sky.

The Mirraitjja estate in Gurralangga is created.

Ngnalk njugala. The water of God is liberated.

Visually, the purifying rain melds the two upper panels. On a more spiritually level, it is of course the baptism of the Rembarrnga as a people, a nation. The moment that they are the blessed (and therefore saved) by Grandpapa God through Gunungu. Consumed and then regurgitated, reborn onto the new land (bottom panel), they are the rightful, true people; leaving behind the hapless, wild people to their fate.

People live an ordered structured life. Implied by the two humpies with their fork stick construction and large bark panels in Yirriatjja and Duwa colours. The ubiquitous totemic mosquitoes⁶ continue their role into the new world. Two anthills, symbolically male and female, contain the ordered industrious termites.



⁶ Mosquitoes, different types, follow both moieties. *"Some mosquito are Duwa and some he is Yirritjja."* Ref. First Rain to the Rembarrnga discourse.



Trees flourish, providing shelter and resources. Fire. Balance and harmony fill out the last panel.

Calmness descends. The people can practise ceremony. Water from God is harnessed, the monsoonal rains arrive every year to revitalise the people, renew the land, sustaining the people.

"Their own block."

A new utopia for the Rembarrnga and the allied tribes who bore witnesses to the amazing event. Importantly it was the establishment of a moral code, by which to live, on earth and in heaven.

Once before, Grandpapa God looked after all the people. Good people, bad people, it don't matter. But then they were punished. Ref. 138 03 gp Murluh Man

Finish! He drowned them. All around the world and this country. This country drowned. Underwater, all the hill. I know this from the Bible story and from another different bible story. Dark people bible! They knew. My father knew. Ref. Old Noah discourse.

An artwork colossal in scale and implication for the Rembarrnga, both the moment preceding the "big rattle"⁷ and then onward to the formation of the Yirritajja and Duwa moieties on earth.

Still yet, live the Mirraitjja Clan of the Rembarrnga Nation of Northern Australia. A heritage that encompasses Gurralangga, Earth and the Mirraitjja clan, interconnected from the time of Mijindah to now.

⁷The event referred to as the Big Rattle is an intriguing one. At face value we may interpret it simply as the roll and rumble of thunder as a supercell of a storm approached the people.

Paddy has also referred to earthquakes as being the rattle of the approaching Borlung. The Big Rattle could perhaps have been the trigger event of the Big Flood, for which Borlung was considered the omnipresent deity responsible, by indigenous peoples. Ref. 1A icewater melt, approximately 15000 – 25000 years ago.

However, I am not willing to discount a fourth possibility of an incredible polar shift. Ref. Laschamps event 42000 years ago.

Gurralangga(R)	The heavens. Literal translation is, of a large body or mass, an ocean.
Mijindah(R)	"In the beginning".
Gunungu	Black Head Python. Can be its physical manifestation on country, or as in the celestial manifestation. The river of stars (Milky Way).
Barnumbirr	Morning Star (Venus).
Ngnalk njugala	Rainwater from God.
Wybalk	Mirraitjja Clan ancestral homeland in Central Arnhemland
Gullarjult	Wybalk place name
Mardayin	Sacred ceremony

These are the spirit people, “first true people”, the ancestral beings to the Rembarrnga, gifting them the knowledge and lore of the Rembarrnga homelands. It would be more accurate to label this artwork as the “First Duwa man and Yirriatija woman”. They share identity with the Rembarrnga people, duality, they are one and the same. They represent everything it is to be a Rembarrnga person of the Mirraitija clan, who all exist, as with all creatures, under the moiety system that orders all life.



232 03 nop. Balang-jarr-ngalan Man and Woman