

'Go with the White Angel'

by
Michael 'Karlerrh' Bolton

Paddy Wainburrnga Fordham is a major Australian artist with things to say.¹ He has advice for all cultures when it comes to leaving this life for the next, *'Go with the White Angel.'* The late senior Rembarrnga cultural leader and artist composed *White Angel* spirit only once and then described him to me with a sense of cautious reverence.



254 04 cgp 75*56 cm *White Angel*

¹ Among PWF's many contributions are the poles he painted for the 1988 *Aboriginal Memorial* <https://nga.gov.au/aboriginalmemorial/remb.cfm> and his *Too Many Captain Cooks* 1985 bark painting.

White angel portrays a figure from one of Fordham's recurrent waking dreams in which an angel appeared ready to escort him to the skies. He was always keen to be on guard, though in case the devil took the form of an angel and played a trick on him.

Nicholas Rothwell, The Australian. "Stark Visions of Death and Devilry"

Long time ago all the Christian people, white people, the angel used to come to them. Not you and me now..... they just look after you and me from long way. Or might be they just waiting for old people who passed away, die like that. That what they waiting for; they'll take you.

But there are dangers at the beginning of the journey.

Murl-rulih, he the black one..... White one is different, he God side. The black one he half sit-down (squat) the black night. You know; darkness. Some they good, but some they got a lot of trick. They the Satan. They might trick you. You might speak to the wrong one. Satan. You might reckon they stand up all Angel, but you don't know which is the one. People can't know, it's very rough.

.....

You might say. "This one!"

But might be he gone to the wrong bloke – Satan!

Satan in the same clothes.

.....

White Angel, you can see him through the bible thing and through the service. You can't see their life, they just the wind. Can't hardly look, they can sing us, they can come from another earth. We can go to them. Long way for us. Too far out you can't see him but they can come.

Thence, Golong Wurla stands; incandescent white against the darkness. Fierce, vigilant, poised slightly forward. Alert, ready. Not one, but an army. The Angel People.

All different group, all different power, but we still belong to the; every one of them. They just the wind. They live in the cloud but they know what going on. We don't know. We only this earth and dust. That's where we live.

.....

Sometimes when you true and you believe you can see them. You can see them but you can hardly know. If they want to come, they can come, they got a road.

.....

When a man pass away, you gone to that place. They take you away, they show you where to go. Too many idea we don't know. Might be too much bad road we don't know where the good road go. This mob show people where he belong to.

Stop there Michael. This happened for (Jolly) Liawonga when we take him from the Katherine Hospital (Palliative Care Unit) back to Top Camp at Beswick. Make the humpy. All the nieces and family come around. We sing the traditional songs, It's like a funeral song, to get them ready. You know, like make their mind relax.

And all the Christian song in language, too. So, the Christian People came and sang those song too.

He liked those songs.

Every day and night, we did this.

He said "I can see them there. Three Angel People there."

For three nights he told us that. "I can see them."

On the third night, very early in the morning, they took him away. Just like that, take his hand.

Quiet. Oh! It was so good.

Milliwanga (Sister to PWF) 21/01/2021

We just call-im Golong Man Wurla. That mean very clever man, very good. You know he's the Angel People, they belong to our grandpa side and where they come from. We just call them from Rembarrnga, Golong Wurla. It's okay; fire spirit life, he cleans you out, rubbish stuff away. That's how we say from language, Golong Wurla, very clever man. Every language calls them by their own-own name.

The reader may naturally assume that Fordham has appropriated a familiar Christian theme from the Methodist missionaries to Arnhem land. Has he really just re-created a parabolic angel from the innumerable sermons delivered to his people during the 'Missionary Times'?²

Of course not. The concept and presence of benevolent (and malevolent) spirits amongst the Indigenous congregations, wasn't a new idea at all. This white angel has a shared heritage amongst all tribes. Angels belong to everyone as Paddy says. **"Every language calls them by their own-own name."** They have never, ever been the sole spiritual property of just any one religious denomination nor tribe; including the well-intentioned Methodists. He declares this quite clearly in 254 04 by naming White Angel as ... **"Golong Wurla."** A distinct Rembarrnga language name that demonstrates their shared awareness of a divine creature.

² 'Missionary Times': A term used by the Artist to tell of the advent/influence of Christian Missionaries into Arnhem Land. (ref: *Missionaries to the People* bark painting tells of the complex interaction to two cultures finding a common cause.)

To be sure, Fordham was indeed, whole-heartedly engaged (and impressed) by the Biblical teachings and ritualised ceremonies of the First Missionaries to Arnhemland, though it is my supposition, that he and many of the gathered tribespeople, in the first instance, heard loud resounding echoes of their own pre-existing storylines. For instance, when recounting his own epic stories of creation, he would often reference the story thus ***"It's in the big book, the Bible"***. This always sounded to me that he was using the big book as a validation of his own peoples' narrations, rather than suggesting, for himself, that it was in anyway a recent revelation from the Old Testaments.

White Angel is one such example of this pre-Christian pre-existing spiritual knowledge. Within 254 04, the extraordinary composition by Fordham, there are a number of other interesting artistic ponderances that also bear further consideration. For example, the vestments of angel. Could they be a disciple's garb or a pastor's cassock, exuding overt masculine authority synonymous with the colonisers, or perhaps, more like a nun habit, quietly speaking the virtuous feminine values of chastity and purity, that epitomized the Northern Territory coastal work of early missionary sisters?

I believe neither.

In this depiction, I rather interpret it to be a shroud. Contextually, it is more in keeping with its venerated role of collecting and guiding a deceased person spirit onward to their final resting place. *Guttah-jarnng* – Sacred Star. The Morning Star; (as indigenous people from the Top End of Northern Territory refer to planet Venus). Additionally, the fluid, draping apparel means that it is neither male nor female, but androgenous in nature and quite beyond the base temptations of earthly creatures, as it travels at will from the stars to fulfill its holy funeral duties.

Moreover, Golong Wurla seems to wear a bonnet, containing its angelic fine feathery hair. Perhaps this is a nod to the head ornamentation worn by the flow of visiting clergymen and women to Arnhem Land. Though upon rumination, it is more akin to the ceremonial headdress (Jamurrarr) of dancers, in the shortened style of the Spirit People that inhabit Arnhem land, as noted by Miliwanga (PWF's sister).

Further-more the viewers gaze will inevitably notice the heavy oversized bare-feet that float lightly above the bottom border. Our first ingrained thought could suggest a biblical barefoot prophet emerging triumphant from the desert. Alternatively; could it be ... into the challenging, harsh, sparse terrain of the ancestral Wybalk plains country that abuts the cragged escarpments. More akin to the Rembarrnga creationist hero. Barra-Kolohkoloh? (Ref 127 02 gp Lefthand Man. Barra-Kolohkoloh). Miliwanga often speaks of this Spirit ancestor. (see transcript).

And finally, within the blackness of this apparently sparse minimalist artwork, behind White Angel, we see, deliberately placed by the Artist, filling the black void is the foremost symbol of the Christian faith. The crucifix?

Representing the dubious aspirational Christian ideal of suffering before salvation. Slightly askew, organic in its imputation, it stands embedded upon an earthen mound. The cursory interpretation of this arrangement would be that it expounds - it is Jesus the Son of God, that sanctions this celestial creature duties on earth.

Or once again, could there possibly be another, older interpretation of this ubiquitous Christian symbol?

Miliwanga, fondly recalls evening story time in Bamnyil (Beswick) Community in the house yard of Jeanie Balguju, when Mirraitjja fathers would gather to talk of Country, fondly recalling the Wybalk homelands and Bamdibu estate. She clearly remembers that on occasions they sometimes spoke of a special cave that contained the stars. Stars in white ochre, adorned the rock shelter wall, carefully painted there by their forebears, a long, long time before, the missionaries belatedly arrived with their good books in hand.

“Not a diamond star like you draw but” and she gestured in the air, a downward vertical line, overlaid with a horizontal.

A cross by any other name.

For an aeon, across the indigenous lands of Northern Australia, the simple cross configuration of marks had been used as a cultural representation of the stars by artists. Not only in rock art, but also often illustrating the lorrokons (hollow log coffins) of the deceased, even today. How else could the Rembarrnga people (and other tribes) talk of the stars above them and to the very place their first ancestors originated from, without their own words, own distinctive iconography. A star; specifically, the most paramount, most sacred star of all the stars in Top End indigenous cosmology, referred to as Barnimbirr. Is the Morning Star.

.....

*“.... **our grandpa side and where they come from.**”³* The place considered to the very origin of the Rembarrnga People, would undoubtably require its own symbolic form of expression. It is not inconceivable therefore, that this same, simple arrangement of marks that would also be the very same arrangement upon which the Romans would decide to nail and impale a cleverman named Jesus in a bloody crucifixion.

A cross by any other name.

A star or crucifix? Given the thematically re-occurring concept of duality that constantly threads itself through all of Fordhams vast body of works, it is probably both. And in this instance, largely irrelevant given that the more profound argument he presents within 254 04, is this...

³ Not literal but spoken in relation to the ancestral line of that family to the beginning of their history. Thus, generally (and in the context of this article) means their journey from the Morning Star.

.... The fiercely spirited, indomitable White Angel is a unique Rembarrnga construct by the Artist. He has made it their own divine flag bearer for their ancient spiritual belief system. A tribal chronicle of creationism that include; Papa God and gods⁴, messiahs and prophets, visitations, miracles, holy sites, places of worship, spirit people and the First People. The Balang-jarr-ngalans. A highly elaborate oral, pictorial and ceremonial narrative many thousands of years mature. Up to and including today, the unyielding White Angel is still at the interface of this trio of elemental players, from the First World – The Dreaming. Of God, Earth and Heaven. It stands fearless and uncompromising, the transient warrior.

Before contact, before governance, before the preachers; the Rembarrnga and their affiliated tribes were certainly not a “godless people”. They were deeply religious, deeply spiritual, reverently practicing and renewing their own faith, through art, ceremony and teachings. In 2003, as an old man, I believe that Fordham spoke for all of Australia's indigenous tribes pre-contact, when he said quietly, defiantly ... ***“We know about heaven.”*** (Ref 246 03 gp Sun Dreaming). A knowledge of, that preceded the arrival of the first of many, Methodist preachers with hard-covered Bible in hand, grimly determined to save the gathered souls.

So, in closing, if, upon your deathbed, at your final earthly breathes, there surprisingly appears to be a dark demon on one bedpost and a pale angel on the other. Both, earnestly professing to be sent from your grandfather to ensure your safe passage through the afterlife.

Do not choose in haste!

It could well be a test ... ***“Satan in the same clothes....”***. As Paddy cautioned earlier. And so, Wainburrnga might well have you challenge them simply, directly, thus....

“What Country we?!”

Hesitation will betray their duplicity.

“You don’t know me!”

“You the bullshit one! Satan.”

Thereby casting the detestable creatures asunder.

.... Meanwhile listen carefully to the wind. Try to hang on a little longer for the true Angel to materialize. He/she won’t be far away.

It’s somewhat important, at the abyss of death, that one selects the right White Angel, to ride on home to Barnumbirr.

- Thanks to Miliwanga for language assistance and additional cultural knowledge.

⁴ Fordham considers both Borlung and Lightening Man to be the apex creationist creatures on earth and in the sky. They are of equal import.

Supplementary Artworks

Sun Dreaming

There is no doubting that the Sun, our largest star by far, sustains all life on earth. Fordham draws its shadow upon Arnhemland as the intriguing 246 03 gp - Sun Dreaming.

***Nobody has drawn one of these.
I can draw everything, that's the
way I go.***

A creation story of remanant small arachnid-like creature that carries a symbolic cross upon his back

That mark, that his tribe mark.

*This is the Sun(Son?) Dreaming.
One side, close to Anhemland, the
son walked. The son(sun?) go
away from heaven and come to
here. He's burned up now.
That's his power – Sun Dreaming.
Mutta, we call him.
That place its name is
Wurrajongarr. One from
Rembarrnga, one from Gungeni.
He got a graveyard.*

*Him underneath now, him finish.
He's there. Son. Buried up.
That's his graveyard, Mutta. The
Sun, he on top. This one is his son
on the bottom. He was punished. Sun sent him down. He didn't die. He there. He's a
Mutta Wurrajang. No more anymore nobody humbug him.*



246 03 gp 75*56cm Sun Dreaming

They know in heaven what happen in this earth.

*Some other people got the Sun Dreaming too you know. All different mob. This one for our
place where we live. All mixed Gungeni (Gun-gjeihmi?) and Rembarrnga.*

That mark, that his tribe mark.

We call him Kryurrll when him make himself sun too.

That's for us mob to look after him. We know about heaven.

Gulgukuka - Moonman



Moonman Story by Paddy Wainburrnga Fordham from the Mimi Arts Lost Bark Collection

The Moonman Story is of a messianic character sent by God to the three socialised Rembarrnga/Nglkan clans. 109 02 documents his visitation, death and ascension into heaven by Fordham. Above, a more detailed pictorial record exists of an earlier bark rendition.



*109 02 gp 75*56cm Gulgukuka - Moonman*

In the graphite, Fordham mimics the cross with a stone axe. The purpose of the innovative stone axe at this juncture in the formation of the Rembarrnga nation was “... **to show man how to make humpy.**” In Fordham's sense of his history, this possibly demarks the tribes transitional development from primitive, unruly “... **wild people.**” to a semi-nomadic, ordered “... **civilised the people.**” A congruous collection of Rembarrnga clans who would move forward harmoniously, in time, to actively practise tribal lore and ceremony.



Note the re-occurring motif of morning star with the new moon. Found in many indigenous art forms.

This is our story, Ngalkan and Rembarrnga Tribe. This is our story of moonman. It's the story of when we try to grow. That's the way he help people. This one is in the biggest book too. He's the one that came on this earth. Every Moonman came to civilize the people who make a wrong (sinners).

There were Moonmen everywhere, but this was the one for Arnhemland mob. Every Moonman that came to Earth, came to help the people live their life. God had sent him out from heaven. When he came, but he had emu feet, so people frightened. They lived by themselves in their own humpy.

Unfortunately, due to the people's mistrust and lack of faith, a miscommunication ensues that leads to them to rue their missed opportunity of immortality, as they belatedly, and unsuccessfully attempt to follow his example.

The three kinds of people. Number 7 Fish People, Nillycat People (Northern Quoll), Wallaby People. They all dead now. They lived in camp, weren't wild; not like Rock Kangaroo or Plains Kangaroo. They were different then.

*He went and ask the people. "You gotta believe me!"
He said. "Come drink my piss, you fella drink my piss."
He meant to say "Drink my power". But he said it other way round.
They think they have to drink his toilet, but its his power; his water. He asked everyone of the (three) people.*

*But no one believed!
Moonman said. "See me now, me, I am going to die. You take me to bury me."*

*So when he died, they picked him up, took him and they buried him in the ground.
But then; he did come up through the hole into the sky on the new month.
That's when they say. "Oh, why didn't we believe. We should have believed."
Everybody said. "But we believed we would die!"
"We should have believed, but can't do nothing now!" they said.*

*You see, because those three kind of people(clans) make a wrong, they can't come back.
They die for good. They waited 4 or 5 days; they couldn't come back. Nothing.
For Moonman, they waited 1 or 2 day and he came back.
"Look there!" they said. "Moonman come back each life but we can't do it!"
New month, every time he come back to show his body.*

After three people die, no more come back anymore. That's the way people die today. Go to heaven, can't come back.

Moonman came with a cross when he came to the people. They didn't know he was a true man. All the Moonman like that. He came from the sky, he go back to the sky. He shows himself and his life. It's all in the big book, his story.

He shows his body every new moon. Reminding them of their lack of faith

Missionaries to the People



Paddy Fordham Wainburranga

Rembarrnga people, Northern Territory
c.1941 – 2006

Missionaries coming to the artist's community

c.1994
earth pigments on bark

Place made

Katherine, Northern Territory

Medium

earth pigments on bark

Dimensions

210.0 x 85.0 cm

Credit line

Gift of the Friends of the Art Gallery of South
Australia 1996

Accession number

971P8

Signature and date

Signed l.c. "PADDYORDAM". Not dated.

Media category

Painting

Collection area

Australian paintings - Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander

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Barrakolohkoloh – Lefthand Man



127 02 gp 75*56cm Lefthand Man Barrakolohkoloh

Lefthand Man has two skin groups. Dalabon and Rembarrnga People from the Beginning. This old man used to camp with his People, but then he walked out.

"I gotta go." He said.

He walked out.

"I'm going to leave you mob. My People, I'll go away." Like that.

He was Wamut (skin group). Like my father skin – Mikkalah Duwa Man (Kinyjin-Kinyin).

He walked out for two miles and he sing about everything that came to him. He went funny. He walked away because he went funny, different. And that's the way people are; anybody. When you get funny, you can walk out.

You say "I'm going, I'm going to leave you mob now. Might be any time I come back. I'm going to that place."

That's the way he went. Start thinking different. This was a punishment from long time ago. God punishment! Make you walk out.

He looked back and think "I'll be turn different."

"I'll go there and stand up."

And as soon as he stand up, he Treeman now.

Lefthand Man, and he make himself into a Treeman now. Lefthand Man.

That place, its name is Barrakolohkoloh. One big Pine Cone Tree stands up. Lefthand, big one. That tree is lefthand too. Anything; buffalo touch him, he will go lefthand too. Everybody who touches it. That's the story for Rembarrnga People. That country and its trees called Barrakolohkoloh. He named it.

My dad was a Lefthand Man too. Everybody that follow that Dreamtime are Lefthand People. Everywhere in the world. Even the bullock, no matter what, buffalo or bird. We still call people Lefthand, like the first time.

Miliwanga elaborates more of his story

Paraphrased Feb 2021

Barrakolohkoloh came from the stars to live with the Rembarrnga People for a time. He was like a prophet. Gifting them knowledge and teaching lore, he showed them the right and proper way to live in this country.

After a time however, because his work was finished, he told them that it was time for him to leave them and go back to whence he came. The stars.

The people were very upset, crying for him to remain with them on this earth. He told them not to worry because his spirit would remain in the white gum trees that grew in this place. (And still do today.)

So, the distraught Rembarrnga people watched as he walked out, past the ghost gums. His very footsteps transforming into flat ovoid stones as he departed. And then.

He disappeared before their eyes. Entering a kind of a door, a portal. He had vanished!



*Lefthand Man. Private Collection.
Commissioned via MBFA.*

Another part humanoid Barrakolohkoloh depiction. The Artist effectively implying the spirit of the Rembarrnga prophet still yet inhabits the sacred white eucalypts of the area.