

Make You Clever

by
Michael Bolton

This is really devil one, the one that eat human being. He has a big stink. You can smell-im. He is the boss for every devil. Very bad shit! He really dirty brains, really no good one! Paddy Wainburrnga Fordham 2002.



Witchdoctor 075 02 GP Paddy Wainburrnga Fordham

Thus, Paddy introduces this rendered fellow, one of the earliest graphite's that he created and it in turn, found itself to be part of the centrepiece graphic artworks for the Nginy Golong Ma – A Cleverman 2006 retrospective exhibition. He took great delight and hilarity in regaling to me its reprehensible story, but also in acknowledging the Ngalan Witch Doctor, for his formidable powers of sorcery and mischief.

Similar to many artworks in the graphite series, it is like one card out of an old-fashioned animation flip card series. This is one of Fordhams favoured technical devices that he uses to suggest movement in his 2D artworks. With this bad boy we definitely get that impression and more, vim and vigour, and after a time – madness!

King of the Devil people, born with one leg, lurches towards us, one hand grasping his walking stick, the jubul jubul. It strikes the ground, raising dust, rumbling and stumbling, the King comes, eyes wide and bright, lock onto you. The raised left-hand beckons, perchance, that you maybe that gullible fool among the audience that he is looking for. He is obviously about to abscond this bordered existence with some ***“dirty”*** purpose in mind.

We look to the implements of trade swinging gaily about his torso. A menacing collection of dancing bone needles that hang via twined bush string. Paddy explains....

They just keep the devil bones for other devils. They will bury-im in the dirt, in a place where the devil-devil jump up and down. Sometimes he will be careful and find-em first. He will pick them all up and bury-im nother place, so another devil will jump on him. All the devil bone go into his body; all over. Kill-im! He goes further to caution his own countrymen about using these dreaded barh karh. ***If me-fella find-im devil bone, must never use-im on us mob.... He just for devil!***

And then there is the sagging bush string bag, hanging heavily, ... ominously full.

Bush string bag is golpon; he fills it up with the dead people and eat it like a bush honey. Chuckles Paddy. Us mob bury dead people but this one goes into the ground; cuts-im up and puts it all in his dilly bag; carry-im off. Like that. Proper stink!

He will give you some too if you want. If you eat it, it will make you clever.

Of course, he is happily willing to share his appalling bounty to those who desire to possess the alluring powers and insight of the third eye. However, like all Grimm conundrums, there is always the veiled personal cost of such a transaction, which Paddy succinctly warns those who may be tempted to eat the decaying flesh of their brethren.

He give you the stink meat to make you clever, but he always say...

"Don't eat-im too much! That's for me!". Belly-laughs Paddy.

He mad bastard!

Make you clever but make you mad too!

The price is madness!

As with many of the Ngalan (devil) creatures that I documented throughout the graphite series, there were nearly always metaphorical (and physical) echoes in Fordham's own natural world of man and beast. Sometimes the characters were very close to his own heart, this enigmatic fellow is one of those.

Was Wainburrnga a Cleverman? In my dealings, I found him to be a self-assured charismatic man of considerable talents. A warrior poet, his irrepressible life force, confidence and outgoing nature lead to many adventures and achievements across the different cultural worlds that he trans-versed. He was a man who absorbed and maintained ancient story and song lines, merged these with the biblical, and readily created new narratives from his experiences.

By his own recounts there was a time when Fordham considered himself in possession of special powers. When talking about Mukkips (ref 148 03 GP), a type of mimih that lives under the ground, he said

"I seen him but I can't tell story. It's my secret. If I talk story. Yes, I got very important one but I don't want to tell him. That's for yourself.... Your brain open up Your eye like a telescope. I bin look that mob (mukkips). I savvy. I seen him one when I witch doctor one."

I pressed ***"But Paddy you yourself, are you a Witch Doctor?"***

Paused. ***"I bin witch doctor. By my own life, bible and everything. I cant tell-im."***

"If I tell you it gotta cost a lot of money. People gotta buy me for that. You give your own story, you take him power back. Tell him everybody else. You fuck all, finished. You gone, you gotta keep you secret"

Fortunately perhaps, I never did I have enough gold coins in my pocket to acquire the secret knowledge. By the same token, we can see that he was very conscious of losing this clever power.

““You gotta keep your secret. They looking from long way back, they listening.”

They say “Oh you wrong!”

If I tell you everything, you gone all you witch doctor clever. He’ll be gone, you’ll be free walk around. If you tell him too much, they’ll be listening to you.

“Oh, I’ll take him back; my clever back” they say “I give him witch doctor” they get him back. You nothing, you free. Finish. Punishment.”

The gift given could be just as rightly be repossessed from the unworthy.

The gift or the clever, Fordham has described in the MBFA/PF audios as

- Possessing healing powers to cure physical and spiritual malaise in others.
- Physical powers of endurance & resilience. ***“You can walk through the rain when you have that sort of thing (power). No matter big storm coming, you warm, you not go cold.”***
- Knowledge & use of secret songs to protect himself and others.
- Knowledge & use of love magic.
- Ability to interpret prophetic signs in nature & creatures.
- Harness the power of Creationist Spirits (eg Borlung, Lightning).
- Visions of spirits and deceased relatives.
- Ability to communicate with creatures, deceased relatives and spirits. (ref 287 05 GP Drinking in the Cemetery)
- Ability to identify in all his manifestations & defeat Nammoorrroddodo (satan). (ref 080 02 GP Oenpelli Hill Incident transcript)

As already hinted at, this clever he eventually lost as he moved closer and closer to the regional town of Katherine for work and access to alcohol. And tea.

“When I was drinking, all my thing (power) go away. When you witch doctor people or whitefellow witch doctor and you drinking grog stuff and hot stuff .. hot tea ..that kill-im all your power.... You got (to) be very carefully.”



White-winged Chough

One of Paddy's most intriguing exploits, was the Old Barunga Cemetery event. On this occasion, three ceremonial men of repute. Paddy Wainburrnga, Djolly Liawonga and David Blansia, for a reason not explained to me, decided to sleep in the Old Barunga Cemetery. During the night they were visited by spirits, in the form of the Ngangangangah birds (White Winged Chough). The noisy vivacious birds communed throughout the night sharing the songs, chants, dance and the musical rhythms of the Spirit People to the three men. Upon waking the three men discovered they had all experienced the same dream and had imbued the complete Bongeleny Bongeleny* songline and ceremony.

Whilst I was verifying aspects of this article with Paddy Fordhams sister, Milliwanga, she also told me of yet another interesting incident.

As a young man, he would walk around Barunga and Bamyili communities, always with an old bible in his hand.

*People would scoff and scorn, recalls Milly. **“Look at him.”** they would say mocking. **“He can’t even read and write! He never went to school, but always carrying that old Bible around.”***

Ignoring their good spirited teasing, Paddy just continued to do his own thing.

*Then one day. **“Oh, look at you! You can’t read or write!”** called out his good-humoured tormentors again. Laughing.*

*He stopped, looked and said to his mockers **“I’m going to eat this Bible!”**
He sat down.*

“He ate that book. Everything.” says Milly.

With incredibility in her voice, as if it happened yesterday, she whispered. “Michael, he ate the Word of God!”

It seems, that Wainburrnga, well understood the potent nature of metaphors in life.

“He was more powerful after that! They all feared him!”

Understandably so.

- * Bongeleny Bongeleny ceremony includes
 - Shadow dance (beginning and finale)
 - Devil dances
 - Ngangangangah dance/chant
 - Learning to smoke pantomime
 - Spirit looking for sugarbag dance

The creation of the original song cycle is attributed to the above three men, while later versions were adapted by other tribal groups throughout the country. It primarily explores the way the Spirit people existed in the land.



White-winged Chough