

# Carvings From Creation Time



Courtesy of Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory

**T**HE TIWI PEOPLE of Melville Island off the north coast of Australia tell a dramatic story about a spirit ancestor named Purrukuparli: Long ago, in the Dreaming, the great creation time, Purrukuparli lived on a beautiful island with his wife Bima and their infant son. Every day Bima went out to gather food and took the baby with her. But one morning she met a man called Japarra, who persuaded her to leave the child asleep under a bush and sneak off into the forest with him.

It was a very hot day, and Bima returned to discover that the shade had

moved and that her son had died in the hot sun. When Purrukuparli found out, he was enraged. He struck Bima and drove her into the forest. Then, picking up the body of his son, he walked slowly into the sea, calling out: "You must all follow me; as I die, so must you all die." And so death came into the world.

When Japarra saw what was happening, he changed himself into the moon. Bima became a curlew, a wailing bird who wanders in the night crying in remorse for her lost son.

This epic tale of betrayal and retribution is depicted in a small but dramatic

wooden statue that stands in the Northern Territory Museum in Darwin. Painted in vivid yellow, red, black, and white, the piece shows the weeping Purrukuparli carrying his dead child in his arms and walking into the sea. It is but one example of the dazzling Tiwi arts and crafts that for the past eight years have been coming out of Melville and its twin island of Bathurst.

Lying just 40 miles north of Darwin, these large tropical islands, covered with mangroves and eucalypti and laced by broad, slow-flowing rivers, are home not only to Tiwis but also to a spectacular

