

Transactions and Transformations: artefacts of the wet tropics, North Queensland

Edited by Shelley Greer, Rosita Henry, Russell McGregor and Michael Wood



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Transactions and Transformations: artefacts of the wet tropics, North Queensland

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COVER

Cover image: Rainforest Shield. Queensland Museum Collection QE246, collected from Cairns 1914.
Traditional Owners, Yidinji People

NOTE

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The ARC Discovery project 'Objects of Possession: Artefacts Transactions in the Wet Tropics of North Queensland 1870-2013' research team standing next to some *Bagu* in the Cairns institute.
Left to Right: Bard Aaberge (PhD candidate on the ARC project), Shelley Greer, Russell McGregor, Maureen Fuary, Trish Barnard, Mike Wood, Corinna Erkenbrecht, Rosita Henry.

Dudley Bulmer's Artefacts as Autobiography

Michael WOOD

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During a visit to Yarrabah in 1938, Norman Tindale, then working for the South Australian Museum, collected and documented a number of artefacts given to him by Dudley Bulmer, who was originally from Starcke River, north of Cooktown. This paper uses Tindale's notes on these artefacts to show how Bulmer sometimes inscribed aspects of himself into his artefacts by combining events from his life with representations of Ancestral beings that were important in ceremony. Partly reflecting the power of the state to restrict his freedom, a feature of Bulmer's presence in his artefacts is his absence from his homeland. I argue these elements make some of Bulmer's artefacts inscriptive equivalents to the life story genre of Indigenous writing.

□ Dudley Bulmer, Tindale, artefacts, the Dreaming, autobiography, Yarrabah, North Queensland

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A feature of Dudley Bulmer's life was his involvement in the production of artefacts, rock art and various cultural performances in the Yarrabah region of North Queensland. Relying heavily, but not exclusively, on Norman Tindale's 1938 notes of his meetings with Bulmer and accounts of Bulmer in the 1950s, I adopt what can be broadly termed a biographical approach to the artefacts with an emphasis on autobiographical elements. I favor an expansive notion of biography (and autobiography) that includes any oral, literary, or other semiotic form, that outlined elements of an individual's life (Beckett, 1996: 313). This extension of biographical characteristics to artefacts draws on claims that made objects are expressions of their creators (Munn, 1970) and the social transactions through which they circulate (Hoskins, 2006).¹

Taking an autobiographical approach to Bulmer's works necessarily emphasizes the episodic elements of his autobiography since we have limited data on what he made. The autobiographical elements I outline are not really ordered by an overarching life story understood to be a, more or less, continuous chronology that outlines a developmental trajectory of the subject into the person they have become (Rowse, 2006: 188). Instead this paper discusses Bulmer from around 1916-20 to the 1950s and then moves back to 1938. It is primarily structured by a concern with Bulmer's artefacts, art and performance and this focus, given the limits of the data, highlights the role of the 'fragmentary, occasional, episodic and ephemeral' (Grossman, 2006) as part of any biography and autobiography.

Tindale's notes of his 1938 conversations with Bulmer are not just a guide to Bulmer's biography, but give us access to the autobiographical elements involved in some of Bulmer's artefacts. Tindale details Bulmer's interpretations of the artefacts and designs and outlines some of Bulmer's explicit intentions to self-represent. Bulmer often refers to ancestral figures in his works and outlines distinctly autobiographical components in two of them. In addition he made a message stick that I argue is strongly individualised and autobiographical in the sense that it makes no direct reference to the

ancestral. Given these features I argue Bulmer was creating artefactual and inscriptive equivalents of the Indigenous life story genre of written autobiographies that emerged in Australia in the late 1950s and 1960s (Haag, 2008: 8). Such an argument depends on a generous definition of life story that would not confine it to only one semiotic medium such as writing.

SELF REPRESENTATION, HISTORICAL SUBJECTS AND THE ANCESTORS

A key issue in recent discussion of life stories, understood to include some of Bulmer's artefacts, is whether they can be understood as products of dominant Western discourses about history, the rise of individualism, and the self-production of representations of identity. In some accounts Indigenous artefacts and life stories are presented as primarily part of a wider encompassing or immanent religious framework – the Dreaming – that is radically different to Western understandings of time, history and personhood and the autobiographical (Westphalen, 2002: 2). In this view the Indigenous life story (as text or artefact) is not necessarily significantly 'autobiographical' or 'innovative' in a manner that can be contrasted to the Dreaming. Instead the life story is something that is fundamentally derived from the framework provided by the Dreaming. In this argument all aspects of a known subject's everyday experience are to be ultimately understood, and made meaningful, only by reference to the immanent ancestral order of the Dreaming. Within such understandings it would be improper, and illogical, to credit a single individual with an innovation, such as a life story, because this would ignore the agency of the Dreaming (Poirier, 2005: 244).²

While some of these arguments suggest exclusionary distinctions between an Indigenous relational cosmology, and Western history and individualism, it is clear that many aspects of Indigenous life can involve a subject that is, for a certain time, independent of the Ancestral. It is widely recognised that in many parts of Aboriginal

Australia a complex array of inscriptive practices can be deployed in producing and reproducing Indigenous meaning and memory rather than just those attributable to the agency of the Dreaming in the landscape, events and persons (Beckett, 1996). Rumsey argues that 'a good deal of what we call "history" – the past actions of known human beings – are also inscribed in and retrieved from the landscape' (Rumsey, 1994: 116). These historical events often form part of narratives concerning the Dreaming, fusing mythic and historical modes of orientation and we find, in some areas of Australia, Dreaming events are understood as 'history' and sacred sites are termed history places (Sutton, 1994: 252). Historical elements are inscribed and retrieved in the same way as are those attributable to the Dreaming – both sometimes 'make similar use of the trope of punctuated movement through a fixed series of named places' (Rumsey, 1994: 124) – a point developed below in reference to Bulmer's portrayal of places in his autobiographical works. The forms of social memory created by people like Bulmer are best understood, not in terms of mutually exclusive binary oppositions between oral (myth) and written (history), but as involving a diverse range of inscriptive and other semiotic practices which, in this case concerning Bulmer's artefacts, are similar to some of those practices that are now thought to constitute the life story. Elements of this similarity begin to emerge from a brief consideration of Bulmer's life, his relationship with Tindale and accounts of some of Bulmer's innovative activities at Yarrabah. After this biographical interlude we will consider the more distinctly autobiographical qualities of some of Bulmer's artefacts.

BULMER, TINDALE AND TOURISTS

Dudley Bulmer was from the Jeannie and Starcke rivers north of Hopevale³, with Tindale linking him to 'Koko Imidji' country (Tindale, 1938: 527).⁴ Bulmer was born in 1887 (Denigan, 2008: 60), or in 1893 according to Tindale and Birdsell's estimates.⁵ He remained in the area until he was subject to removal orders issued in 1916 that were concerned with

'destitution'. His wife Polly was targeted at the same time, along with four other family members. There was considerable delay in executing the orders and by 1919 police were unsure as to whom the removal order applied (Denigan, 2008: 60). Bulmer gained employment on stations around Cooktown and then in Atherton. It was not until 1923 that Bulmer was served with removal orders (Denigan, 2008: 61). At the time he was working full time as bullock driver on Bert Veiver's farm in Kuranda (Denigan, 2008: 61; Henry 2012: 34). The Veivers asked Yarrabah mission that he be returned to them, but this did not happen. Bulmer's movement away from his home to Yarrabah was a mix of state power and his own freedom to move. These movements crucially influenced his artefacts and performances. A number of the artefacts evoke the Starcke region and show how Bulmer was linked to both Starcke and to his new home of Yarrabah. Also relevant to my interpretation of Bulmer's artefacts as like a life story, according to his descendants he was not a fluent writer of English.

Tindale had a number of meetings with Dudley Bulmer at Yarrabah in 1938 and the Birdsells, who were working with Tindale, recorded Bulmer's physical features. Tindale, with Bulmer's help, recorded a fairly detailed genealogy of the Bulmer family and some material on kinship organisation in the Starcke River region. Tindale also documented and collected Bulmer's artefacts and moved them into the South Australia Museum, which now acts as custodian of these nine works. Unfortunately the two dancing staffs and the message stick made by Bulmer, and given to Tindale, have been difficult to access. Another consequence of moving Bulmer's artefacts to Adelaide was that, until I arrived at Yarrabah High School in 2013, with copies of Tindale's notes on the artefacts for two of Bulmer's descendants to review, Bulmer's descendants had no knowledge of the existence of these artefacts.

The family has welcomed the artefacts's emergence into their lives. The works contain the possibility of generating new knowledge about Bulmer and his connections to his homeland, One of Bulmer's grandchildren, herself an enthusiastic researcher of Bulmer family history, told me how excited she was

to be attending a Native Title handover ceremony up at Hopevale, but that she was also frightened of going because she did not know more about her 'grandad'. The objects, and Tindale's notes on them, may come to play some productive role in native title claims to Bulmer's land, and the associated politics of ancestral identity, descent, inclusion and exclusion.

Tindale's notes from his discussions with Bulmer are fundamentally about the objects rather than topics relevant to land claims. The notes are often supplemented by beautiful drawings of the works that are, in a number of cases, the only record of the artefact's physical appearance. Unlike Roth's work where Aboriginal people do not emerge as anything other than producers of material objects (Fuary and McGregor, this volume), Tindale's account of Bulmer's works significantly contextualises them in Bulmer's own accounts of their meaning. As a result we are able to partially understand the integration of Bulmer's sense of self, and his own history, with the works he made.

While Tindale records Bulmer's interpretations of the artefacts, it is also the case that he sometimes found Bulmer 'difficult to understand' (Tindale, 1938: 525). At one point he felt Bulmer had given him a 'superficial account' of a story about crocodile Ancestors associated with some carvings and dancing staffs compared to what would have been told and performed in country (Tindale, 1938: 525). He thought Bulmer's account was a 'degenerate' version of the original. Bulmer's was positioned here not so much as an innovator, but as someone producing cultural loss and degrees of inauthenticity due to his absence from country.

Tindale indicated that Bulmer, while at Yarrabah, performed a dance associated with his crocodile Ancestors. Tindale did not see this performance and does not discuss its specific social context. Some idea of what may have been involved is found in Tindale's account of other dances he witnessed at Yarrabah:

One dance performed was from Mitchell River. A second one was performed by Yarrabah native after the Torres Strait

manner. It was claimed that the Torres Strait people had taken this from an Aboriginal corroboree and that it had now come back again. Those who took part all had some Island blood in their veins – none of them knew the meaning of the words they sang. (Tindale, 1938: 441)

What Tindale highlighted was the cosmopolitan ethos of cultural exchanges between different regions of North Queensland, marked by a concern with the right to perform dances (the dance was not really a Torres Strait dance, but 'Aboriginal') and working rules as to who should perform (only people with ties of kinship to Torres Strait).

In his account of the dances, Bulmer presented himself to Tindale as a cultural innovator responsive to the audience:

When the dance was enacted at Yarrabah head dresses were used to which were added the feather 'wheel' ornaments of Tjapukai type. Dudley Bulmer explained these were innovations, which he added to make the dance appeal to the local people, some of whom he had taught to dance in the set because there were not enough of his own people to take all the parts. (Tindale, 1938: 527; (see figure 1))

However Tindale returned to questions of authenticity. Tindale felt that Bulmer's performance of these dances would 'give only a glimpse of the content of the dance as formerly in use in the Koko Imidji country' (Tindale, 1938: 527). Tindale again implied Bulmer was inauthentic due partly to his alienation from his land and what was the full version of his culture.

Dudley Bulmer not only had to deal with this kind of understanding of Aboriginality which structured some of his interaction with Tindale, he was, especially in the 1950s, an enthusiastic participant in local tourist markets with their own requirements for the public performance of Aboriginality. Dudley Bulmer was remembered by his daughter Agnes as being an active seller of artefacts to tourists.



FIG. 1. Bulmer's headdress with Tjapukai wheel. Source: South Australian Museum A27478

Using such sales as a means of gaining an income became more feasible after World War Two if not before. Certainly the Yarrabah mission had banned the selling of artefacts directly to tourists prior to Tindale's arrival there in 1938. He noted that in Yarrabah:

money is not permitted to circulate but credit is awarded on the basis of work done. This is causing no little clash between natives and authority for they were formerly allowed to sell trinkets, curios, and goods in Cairns and to tourists and to obtain money at will. At present everything must pass through the stores books and be sold by missionary staff. Natives claim that the personal contact with tourists brings many sales and that the store makes no effort to sell – the result being a virtual disappearance of incentive for the making of objects with whence to amplify their earnings. (Tindale, 1938: 457)

Bulmer worked for Berkeley Cook, who ran a launch and pleasure resort at Brown's Bay. Bulmer would explain the rock art, make fire and sell artefacts.

Douglas Seaton (1952a, 1952b), a sign-writer from Cairns with a deep interest in the region's rock art, provides us with some idea of Bulmer's work with the tourists. Seaton corresponded with Tindale and in one letter he outlined how Bulmer's performances for tourists could be quite exuberant:

Dudley Bulmer is still the life of the party when tourists visit Browns Bay. Berkeley Cook his employer told me that on one occasion Dudley promised him a surprise when the next lot of tourists arrived. They certainly got a surprise:- when the tourists arrived at the rock paintings Dudley sprang out from behind the rock wearing a gee string and painted up and yelling like a myall. Cook had to quieten things down. Dudley is certainly an actor.⁶

Bulmer also rather exuberantly repainted all the figures in the rock art gallery behind Mr. Cook's house. Apparently local landowners authorized this highly innovative, possibly transgressive, procedure. Bulmer's paintings quickly gained some publicity through Seaton, who was invited to see the rock art by the Cooks. They arranged that Bulmer accompany Seaton when he visited the rock art site. Seaton recorded the rock art (see figure 2) and recorded how Bulmer named the entities he portrayed. These names are primarily in the Yidinj language, but one is probably Guugu Yimidhirr, a language widely spoken in Bulmer's homeland. Seaton also reported that Bulmer told him:

the old men had asked him to keep the drawings fresh. The outstanding figures in this gallery are the paintings of trees: one in particular has a snake painted in a panel on the trunk. The tree represents a large black pine tree (*Podocarpus*) which grows on the edge of the rain forest near the Yarrabah track. The tree is still venerated by Dudley and was "taboo" to any damage by the tribesmen. In the fruiting season the message stick (*wonnggalukken*) was sent out to invite friends to the feast. The snake in the panel signified that this was also good meat country. (Seaton, 1952b: 19)

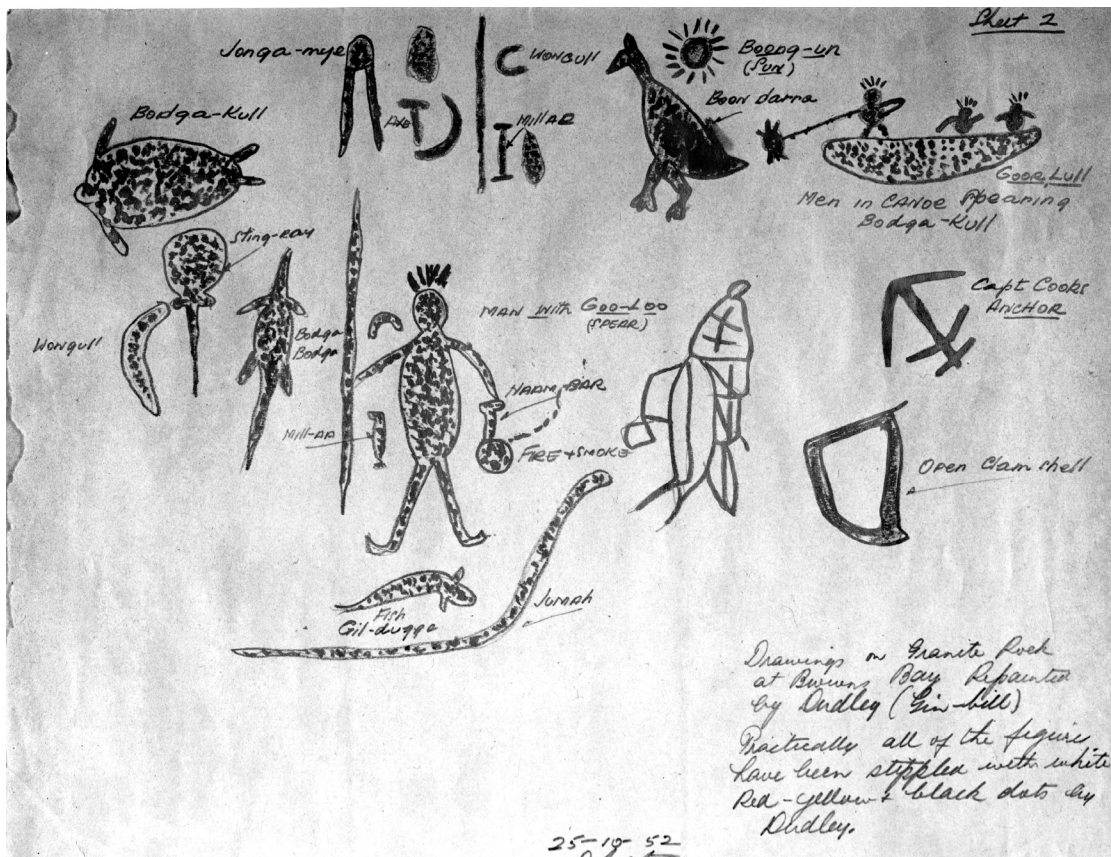


FIG. 2. Douglas Seaton's recording of rock art at Brown's Bay painted and retouched by Dudley Bulmer. Image: AA 287 Seaton Collection, South Australian Museum

Bulmer seemingly failed to tell Seaton anything distinctly autobiographical about these pictures; nor did Seaton record, in the material currently available, any explicit links between the rock art and the Ancestral.

In 1953 Seaton visited Tindale in Adelaide, having sent records of the Brown's Bay paintings made by Bulmer to Tindale (figure 2). Tindale's account of these discussions highlighted how:

in redecorating the designs Bulmer has introduced characteristics of the northern style of painting by which he is represented at our Museum in a series of specimens. In one or two instances, according to Mr Seaton, he has modified the shape of the older designs by joining them together

with new lines ... Among the designs are at least three of sailing ships, which Bulmer claims represent the ship of Captain Cook, and in one very well drawn anchor which is said to have been painted by a native to commemorate an exploit in which he retrieved an anchor for "Captain Cook".⁷

Tindale was primarily interested in Bulmer's rock art 'as an example of a known superimposition of ideas as expressed in paintings'.⁸ Bulmer's painting was then perhaps one of the few documented examples of this process. But it is also the case that Tindale had invested considerable intellectual effort in developing the idea of a specific rainforest culture and people that was based on a unique understanding of the region's history (McGregor, this volume). In the literature on rock

art the northern style is said to be more figurative than the abstract style found in the rainforest region around Cairns and the Tablelands (Buhrich, Goldfinch & Greer, this volume). Edwards, a scholar of rock art in North Queensland, visited the site in 1964 and suggested 'Bulmer's art was after the style of that found in the Laura Cooktown area and was quite different to that found in other old shelters in this area which are quite abstract in nature' (Edwards, 2007: 11). At that time it was possible that there was no highly constraining 'tradition of innovation' (Glaskin, 2005) in respect to this kind of 'abstract' style of rock art painting around Yarrabah and that Bulmer was 'free' to deploy artistic conventions derived from his own country. Nonetheless it is also possible that Bulmer's repainting involved a certain degree of risk.

However innovative, Bulmer's contribution was a marginal, single intervention into the abstract rock art tradition, and it was also ephemeral. When Edwards visited the site in 2007 he could find 'no trace of these paintings. It may be the landowner had erased them to discourage visitors when the resort was closed to the public' (Edwards, 2007: 11).

Dudley Bulmer also positioned himself in other understandings of local history and representations of Aboriginality. He appeared in a film on Captain Cook that was part of a series called 'In the Steps of the Explorers'. Most of the film involved introducing the viewer to the different places and industries that now could be found along the east coast of Australia. These were presented as outcomes of the settlement of Australia initiated by Cook. As part humorous travelogue and part nationalist celebration of the development of modern Australia there was little substantial concern with Captain Cook per se and more with representing novel, possibly exotic, potential tourist destinations to a wider urban audience.

In 1959 Seaton wrote to Tindale and raised issues of authenticity:

I fear old Dudley will not last many more seasons. He recently featured in a 'shell' [text obscure]...film called in the wake of Capt. Cook. The scene was shot at Browns Bay & featured Dudley making fire in front of his

rock paintings this scene was supposed to be at Mission Bay where Cook put Banks & Solander ashore for the day while he looked for water around the beaches. I checked on these facts from Cooks Journal in the Mitchell Library. The commentary during this scene was a bit of tripe they gave a jumble of rainbow snakes & didjeridoo which were unknown to these people. You would think these people would get things right in a film of this type...⁹

Seaton was concerned with the authenticity of the film makers' representations of Aboriginal cultural traits and in opposing the film's version of the history of Cook's travels with Cook's own written version of history. In Seaton's view Bulmer's role became largely a fabrication of the film-makers' understandings of what cinematic Aboriginality should involve.

PERSONAL HISTORIES AND CROCODILE DREAMINGS

What then of Bulmer's own sense of his history, of his life and times? One answer to such questions involves considering, in some detail, Tindale's notes on Bulmer's works. Tindale starts his account in the following manner:

obtained some ceremonial objects made by Dudley Bulmer (N. 652. Sheet 38 genealogy) that were made for a ceremonial dance. Formerly only men attended these dances, but in their "modified" form women were permitted to see them. They were performed north of Cooktown at Starcke River. The first object represents the sea crocodile called *kanja:r*; the second also carved in animal form represents the less ferocious (Johnstone Crocodila) called *dandji djir* which lives only in fresh water (Tindale, 1938: 521).

Linked to these sculptures of the saltwater and freshwater crocodiles (figure 3) were two dancing staffs – one associated with the freshwater crocodile and the other with the saltwater crocodile. The dancing staffs and carvings were related to a

narrative about the country around Starcke River that involved the saltwater crocodile man drowning a man who becomes a freshwater crocodile (*dandji djir*). This story was the subject of the dances, mentioned above, that Bulmer performed at Yarrabah.

Tindale explained some of the designs on the freshwater staff in the following terms:

On the stick associated with *dandji djir* are depicted at one end, *dandji djir* and at the end is *kanja:r* while in between are shown various totemic creatures which were formerly men, the *bigarior* tiger snake, the red kangaroo *njarkali*, the big leech which lives in water batan, the white lily root of swamps, *mumba*, the freshwater turtle *minja dokol* (meat turtle) and other creatures¹⁰...The other sides of the stick are associated with *kanja:r*. The designs

denote places in the story of *kanja:r* which are now also associated with totemic beings. Such designs recalls to the informant [Dudley Bulmer] a detail from the mythology of the tribe...At one end of the stick is denoted a river at Wurumbuku which is opposite 'Noble Island'. Next is depicted a sharp angle double bend in Jeannie River at the place called Jalnga:ngmuku.¹¹ Next is a spear thrower *mibbe:r* shown with its *ngolmo* or shell handle...(Tindale, 1938: 523; my addition of Bulmer's name)

Tindale argues that the staff was a form of social memory that functioned as a mnemonic device in recalling places and ancestral totems. We do not know which of the sites depicted by Bulmer were visited by either crocodile (or other ancestors depicted) nor do we know if the staff was an attempt to portray the sequence of the two crocodiles'

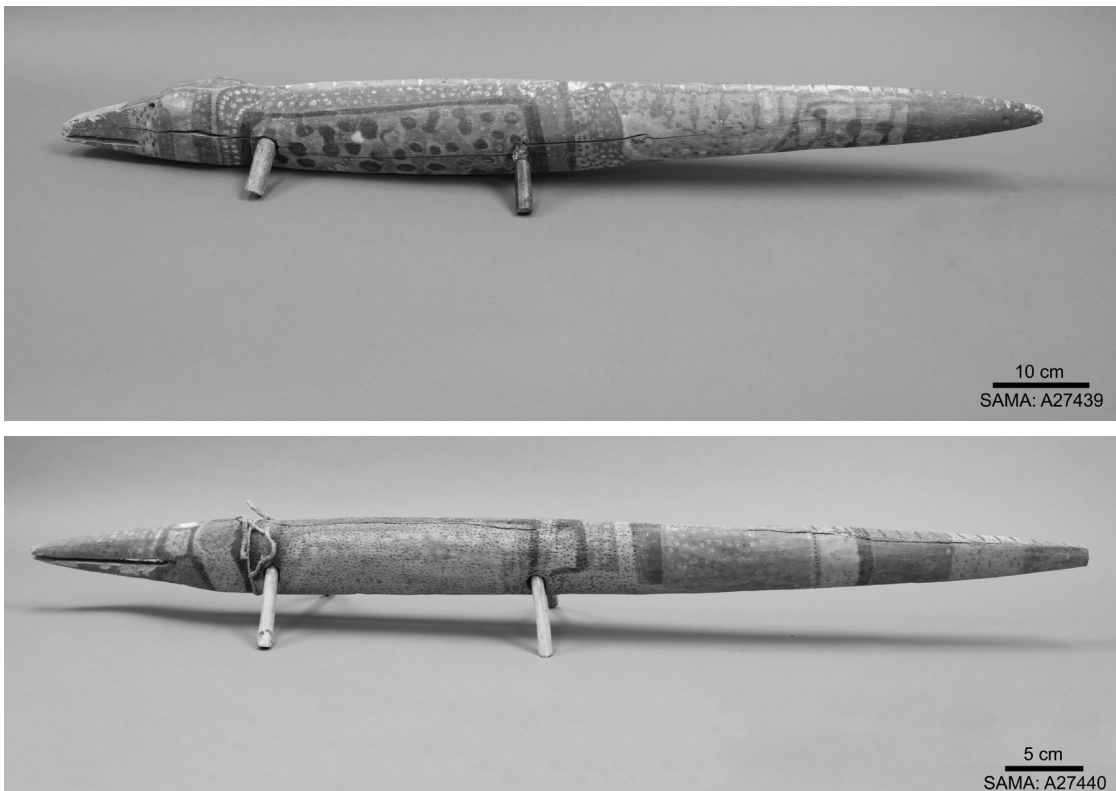


FIG. 3. Top: Bulmer's saltwater crocodile, *kanja:r*. Bottom: freshwater crocodile *dandji djir*. Source: South Australian Museum

travels. The staff's mnemonic function may have been enhanced by the figurative style of the totemic ancestors, but it is possible Bulmer was also thinking of creating images that were thought to be suitable for the tourist market for Aboriginal curios.

Overall this dancing staff, and the other objects so far considered, evokes a classical cosmology linked to the Starcke region. Tindale argues 'the staffs and the crocodile models represent the "story" of the country about Starcke River' (Tindale, 1938: 525-7). These artefacts constitute a specific mode of inscription of this story that is part of a wider and integrated array of semiotic practices found in dance, song, verbal narration and the landscape itself.

Links with Bulmer's life become more evident in the second staff (see figure 4). Tindale wrote that this staff was similar to the other dancing staff, 'but deals with Dudley's own adventures' (Tindale, 1938: 525).

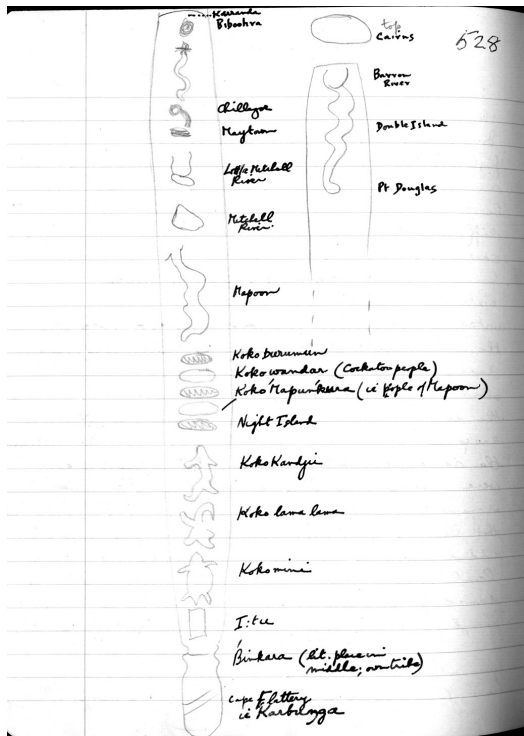


FIG. 4. Tindale's drawing of one side of the saltwater crocodile (*kanja:r*) dancing staff highlighting Dudley Bulmer's travel. Image: AA 338/1/15/1_528 Tindale Collection, South Australian Museum.

In this artefact Dudley Bulmer linked the crocodile *kanja:r* with his own life and travels. *Kanja:r* is depicted on the staff but also depicted are groups of people Bulmer met during his travels. Tindale states the staff:

is associated with the *kanja:r* which is drawn on it. Also depicted ...are figures which represent each of the groups of natives whom Dudley has encountered on his many years of wanderings with whitefolk as trepanger, cattle hand and gold rush guide etc. It becomes a sort of history of whom he has encountered and the places he has visited (Tindale, 1938: 529).

These groups are indicated by different figures and shapes but the relationship between group and design are not explained. Some groups are indicated in Tindale's notes by place names such as Mapoon, Chillagoe, Maytown or Port Douglas and others by language name such as Koko Lama Lama, Koko Mini, Koko Kandju. Others names indicated by Tindale are possibly names of kinship groups such as 'I:tu' or involve a fusion of place names and kinship group as in 'Cape Flattery ie Karbungga' (Tindale, 1938: 528). On Bulmer's genealogy Tindale indicated Karbungga was a 'tribe' of Jeannie River and was associated with Bulmer. He also noted the I:tu and Karbungga tribes were in the process of merging together.

One way of reading the spatial organisation of these designs is that all the groups and places are located in the artefact between the region Bulmer originated from – I:tu, Karbungga, Cape Flattery – and the region where he was then living – the Barron River, Cairns and Double Island, just north of Cairns. This emphasis on Cairns, and his place of origin, framed his representation of his travels. These two locations contextualized, and thereby helped make meaningful, his travels to all other places. This spatial framing suggests that the relationship between birth place and Bulmer's then current residence in the Cairns region was deliberately given salience because the disjunction between the two places was a core feature of his life.

While Tindale does not provide us with an illustration of the staff face containing the crocodile, the fact that Bulmer, and his Ancestral relations, are brought

into conjunction with his apparently more secular autobiographical experiences with the wider world suggests Bulmer saw them as related orientations. By combining self representations of his recent past with representations of selfhood associated with Ancestral powers Bulmer was making a claim similar to that made by Rumsey, in a rather different context, that in Australia 'the forms in which everyday experience of life "on the ground" is constructed or represented' (Rumsey 1994: 119) can be identical, or structurally analogous to, those of the Dreaming. In this artefact Bulmer represented his own mobility, and the persons and places he encountered during his travels as complementary, and as equivalently important, to his relationship with personally relevant parts of the Ancestral (*kanja:r*).

MAPPING PERSONAL HISTORY ON TO A 'MESSAGE STICK'

Another of Bulmer's creations – a message stick (figure 5) – intensified the representation of self and did so partly by making no explicit or direct reference to Dreamings or ancestral figures. In this it differs from Bulmer's crocodile dance staffs which combined his self-representation with the Dreaming. Perhaps for Bulmer message sticks took on more secular functions than did the dancing staffs, and certainly message sticks have long been regarded by Europeans as a kind of Indigenous writing or inscriptive practice.

Message sticks are typically short pieces of wood whose surfaces had designs painted or inscribed on to them. The designs on the stick provided users with degrees of access to a message. Message sticks were often about the social organisation of future events (such as proposed ceremonies or marriages, the organisation of trade) or could involve sequencing past debts and future repayments.

A related key feature of message sticks has been their role in debates about the definition, origin and impact of writing. There were claims that a message stick's inscriptions had a recognizable semantics and contained sufficient information to ensure delivery of a correct message (Bucknell, 1897; Howitt, 1889). The message could be independent from any supporting speech by the messenger.

Others, such as Tindale, argued the message stick was simply a mnemonic device that assisted the messenger to remember the message to be transmitted – no one could determine the message just from the inscriptions (Hamlyn-Harris, 1918; Roth, 1897). This could only be achieved by listening to the messenger's talk. Tindale argued, in general terms, that 'no one else can read a message stick 'unless they have previously been instructed & experience in reading one has no clue to the meaning of any other similar stick' (Tindale, 1938: 535). This unpublished intervention into on-going debates, via his description of Bulmer's message stick, was possibly linked to Tindale's prior (1927) field experiences with message sticks found in the Princess Charlotte Bay area. This is just north of the Starcke river region that was the original home and birthplace of Bulmer. It seems the people of the area visited by Tindale and Hale could not 'read' their message sticks to refresh their memories about details of past events.

Hale and Tindale indicate that in this region:

After messages have been delivered the sticks are usually retained for a long time, being either stowed in string bags or tucked away among leafy coverings of the huts. When interest was expressed by us, more than a hundred old ones were produced for inspection within in a few moments; only in a proportion of the cases could the message be recalled (Hale and Tindale, 1934: 117).

At the time Tindale and Hale visited the Bathurst Head-Flinders Island region of Princess Charlotte Bay in 1927 there were only ten men and fifteen women (and no children) present. So each adult had an average of four message sticks in their possession. This could indicate the importance of message sticks as mementos of past social events and people, something which was also reflected in Bulmer's autobiographical artefacts that were a record of his past.

Tindale and Hale indicate that only in some cases could the specific message associated with each stick be recalled. The carefully stored, seemingly inalienable, message sticks Tindale and Hale encountered were

both memory and other, a memorial of forgetting. Message stick as memory, as a kind of presence of an absent speaker's or inscriber's intentions, was here partly transformed into the absence of meaningful presence. Message sticks involved not just practices linked to the retrieval of memory, but also forms of forgetting and loss that, in the Princess Charlotte Bay area, were seemingly actively maintained and protected over time.

Von Toorn (2006), in her history of Aboriginal literacies, has recently tried to shift the terms of the debate over the message stick's legibility, partly by emphasizing the enabling power and complexity of Indigenous innovations concerning message sticks. She claimed that there is considerable evidence that Indigenous Australians were interested in creating equivalences between letter writing and message sticks, despite the differences between the kinds of signs carried on message-sticks and written texts. She asserted that message sticks and letters were made to perform similar functions (Von Toorn, 2006: 212).

Spencer and Gillen observed written texts known as 'paper yabber' functioning as message-sticks (Von Toorn, 2006: 213).¹² At one point Spencer and Gillen saw 'two strange natives' carrying letters in a cleft stick and noted that:

Though the natives had come through strange tribes...yet so long as they carried this emblem of the fact that they were messengers, they were perfectly safe... Such messengers always carry a token of some kind – very often a sacred stick or bull-roarer. Their persons are always safe, and so the same safety is granted to natives carrying 'paper yabbers' (Spencer and Gillen, cited in Von Toorn, 2006: 213).

This suggests that in various areas of Australia, ritual objects, message sticks and written texts were sometimes treated as equivalent and substitutable in practice. And this seems to be something that Bulmer was doing in his dancing staffs that combined a ritual object with a distinct emphasis on the representation of the self. Bulmer also created an equation of message stick and autobiographical

narrative (but without so explicitly referencing ritual or Dreaming connections).

In his message stick¹³ Bulmer presented himself as a profoundly relational subject, but he does not, in this artefact, indicate any links between himself, his kin, and Ancestral figures. The message stick is in this sense quite different to the staffs. The staffs linked crocodile Ancestors (that were strongly associated with Bulmer) both to places around Starcke and to places Bulmer visited during his work-related travel. The message stick presents Bulmer as an individual independent of any explicit links to the Ancestral.

As Tindale explains, Bulmer's message stick presented a synthesis of his kin with the places he visited on one of his trips from Cape Bedford to Cairns:

Dudley also gave me today a message stick upon which he had cut marks to represent the country between the Jeannie River and Cairns and the various relations whose countries were at those places. It represents a map stick of the country in which he lives. While modified by the artificial extension of the country over which he roamed to include the Cairns district it gives a good idea of how records were kept of the interrelations of peoples. The narration starts from the point marked A, and goes to B, C, D then returning to A. A is Cape Bedford where the informant lived for many years. It is a Mission. ...

[One] cross represents informant's father (*pi:pa*), beyond it, 'half way' to Mclvor River is mother's (*ngam:u*) country. At Mclvor River his sister (*kanjal*) was born, while further north is *jap:a* or elder brother. While still further north an area of land near Cape Flattery is represented as younger brother *tja:ga*. Starcke River is about the centre of the stick, this is the country of the informant's son (*ngatu kangkal* – my – son).....At the top of the stick is *Janga:moko* the place where the informant was born and where he also fought the memorable fight to which he refers...(Tindale, 1938: 533; my addition square brackets)¹⁴

The fight is indicated at the top of the left image marked as B. Bulmer started a quarrel about the woman at Jeannie River and then prepared for a fight which took place at Jangamoko which is Bulmer's birth place. The other side of the message stick – shown as on the right in figure 5 – continues the story of the fight over the women. But there is a long gap in the time. Bulmer is presented as looking for a wife in Cairns, indicated at the top of the image where Tindale, following discussion with Dudley Bulmer, has written Cairns and 'look for wife'.

As well as outlining this intriguing story, Bulmer's message stick takes on the value that derives from depicting a series of places Bulmer visited on his journey to find a wife and merging those places with a very dense array of kinship categories and, sometimes, specific persons ('my son') that also had value in Bulmer's life. Place and kinship relationships were often coded into cross boomerang shapes and elbow bends respectively, but occasionally place and kinship relationship were coded by the same elbow bend design. Bulmer did not just highlight his own autobiography, his wilful fighting and need to find a wife, but also articulated his relationship to places via various categories of kin.

Another feature of the message stick was to provide an account of Bulmer's past movements and the places he visited.¹⁵ This salience as a narrative about Bulmer's past highlights another feature of Bulmer's message stick – its inability to be easily fixed into understandings of message sticks as primarily, but not exclusively, functioning within a predominantly future orientation. While many message sticks convey elements of an unfolding narrative concerning the future organisation of events such as peace, ceremony, trade and debt, and consequently implicate future states full of biographical and autobiographical resonances for the actors enrolled in future acts, Bulmer's message stick lacked any obvious or direct functional integration with potential future events, their organisation or likely outcomes. Bulmer's message stick was primarily a narrative concerning past events understood as completed and as already causally consequential. It was not a 'classic' future

orientated message stick, but a record of past events, and as such a significant innovation. However this statement needs to be qualified by two points: that all semiotic acts, including creating artefacts, create a future and that now Bulmer's artefacts, including his message stick, have re-emerged, in significant ways, from a previously hidden past in the museum, into the present, and potential, futures of Bulmer's descendants (Wood, 2015).

CONCLUSION

I have argued Bulmer's message stick and dancing staffs involved intentionally autobiographical elements being inscribed in to the artefacts. Following van Toorn (2006), I showed that message sticks were a site of considerable innovation concerning the possibility that forms of writing could be deployed productively in the organisation of Aboriginal social life. Bulmer's message stick and dancing staffs were part of that wider interest. Where he may be unique is that his message stick was primarily about himself rather than the future organisation of social events. Instead it was part of a 'narrative process of self-definition' (Hoskins, 2006: 78) that was related to his past and to his regulation of Bulmer's life by the state and Yarrabah mission and his separation from his country.

While parts of Dudley Bulmer's legacy have been erased – his rock art has been erased, his artefacts were unknown to his family for a time, and some of his artefacts have been hard to locate – the picture of Bulmer I have presented in this paper is of someone who, sometimes quite creatively, responded to the different forms of public Aboriginality, and wider understandings of history, that influenced his life. Bulmer's artefacts, and some of his other forms of expression, are a history of his life that included distinctly autobiographical elements. Bulmer through his made works negotiated and defined a number of relationships between the Dreaming and himself as a historical subject. They also record how Bulmer sought to define aspects of his Aboriginality.

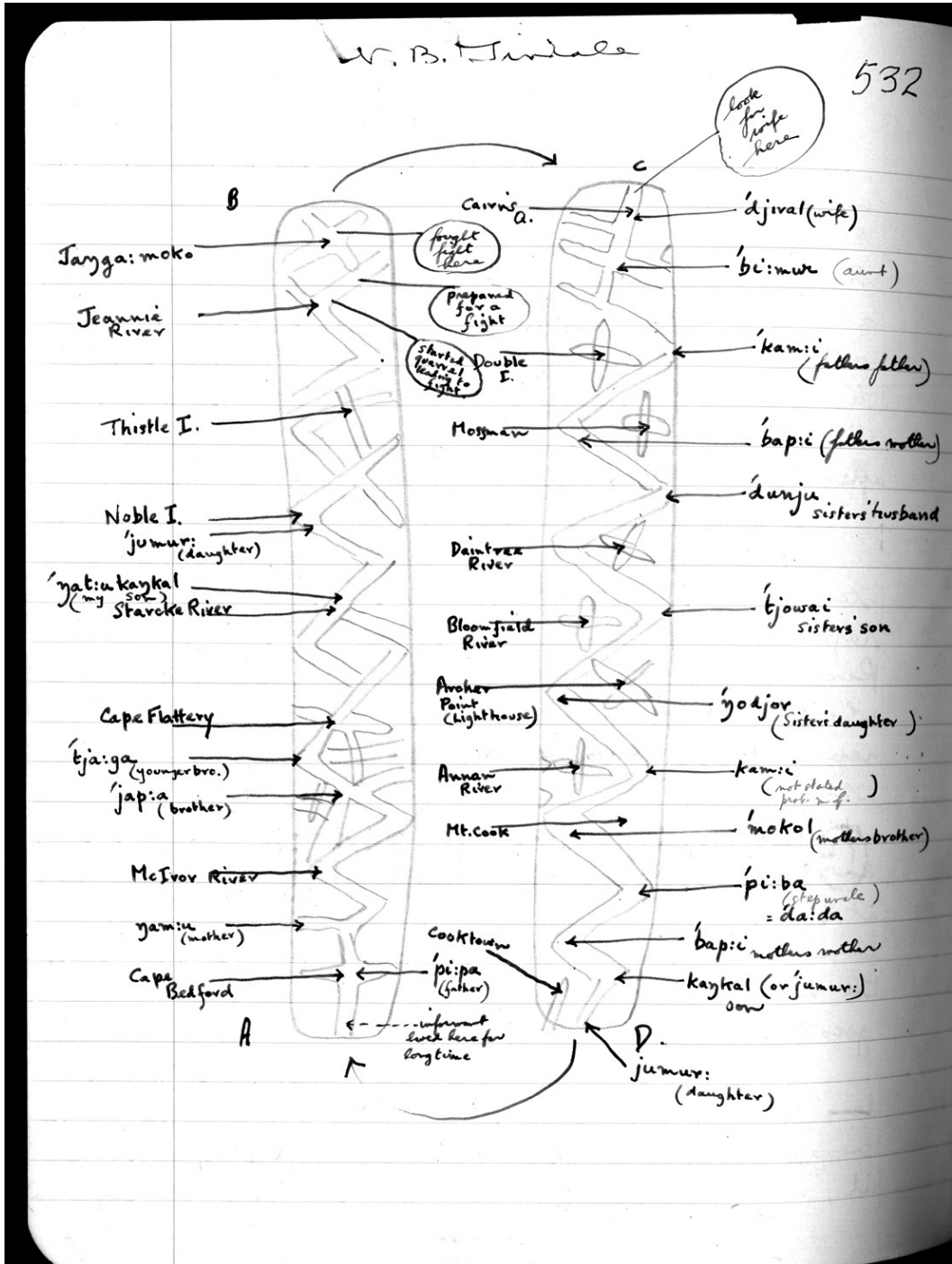


FIG. 5. Tindale's drawing of the Bulmer message stick. Source AA 338/1/15/1_532 Tindale Collection, South Australian Museum (from Tindale 1938: 532).

As a record of these processes some of Bulmer's works emerge as distinctly artefactual versions of the life story genre that developed in the 1950s. Making this claim was equivalent to adjudicating on different approaches to the life story, autobiography and other related, but contested terms. I outlined what in my view were two opposed approaches to the life story, myth and history. These two approaches were the usefully provocative, but somewhat restrictive, accounts provided by Rowse (2006) and Westpalen (2002). They served as a foil to position Rumsey's (1994) approach to Indigenous representations of historical subjects and events. Rumsey's attempts to break down distinctions between the Dreaming and everyday life, between myth and history, oral and textual, resonated with my attempt to treat some of Bulmer's artefacts as like an autobiographical text. What remains as a question is just how novel are Bulmer's more autobiographical works?¹⁶

Equally at issue is the possibility of further linking the current Bulmer family to Dudley Bulmer's artefacts. In 2014 I was able to take Kathleen Bulmer to the South Australian Museum and she was able to see her grandfather's artefacts and read Tindale's notes. Kathleen was primarily interested in discovering genealogical ties with other families that may have links to the Bulmer family or country. Such links could potentially secure further state and legal recognition of Bulmer claims to an interest in country. Her difficulty in finding clear connections was in part an effect of Bulmer's departure from the area. These difficulties were compounded by the fact that Bulmer developed forms of self representation that, while often related to his country, were developed in a time when authoritative state definitions of Aboriginality were not linked to acknowledging rights in land. Kathleen's trip to Adelaide suggests that the Bulmer family have now started the process of creating their own histories and life stories of Dudley Bulmer and will use his artefacts to create new kinds of understanding of their own social relationships, land rights and identity.

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□ ENDNOTES

1. Reviews of claims about the subject-like and biographical characteristics of artefacts can be found in Chua and Salmond (2012) and Fowles (2008). Some of this work wants to move away from human-centered semiotics to the things themselves. Others, like Holbraad (2011), argue artefacts and objects may contain 'autobiographical' characteristics in the sense that such objects can contain their own contexts of interpretation or, at least, specify links to such contexts. A possibly stronger version of this kind of autobiographical argument is that objects contain, or are, their own concepts.
2. Poirier (2005: 248), like many other writers I mention, gives considerable emphasis to the contingent, negotiated quality of the Dreaming that co-constitutes individual agency, but she also argues that ultimately the individual responsible for creative innovation 'disappears' over the long term. This perspective, which implies the reproduction of cosmology in manner not available to Dudley Bulmer, would downplay the kind of histories that Bulmer was both responding to, and creating, in his diverse cultural performances and artefacts.
3. Birdsell Physical Card 652, South Australian Museum (SAM). Tindale Physical Card files
4. Guugu Yimidhurr (Haviland 1979) is a more recent spelling of this language name.
5. Birdsell Physical Card 652, South Australian Museum (SAM). Tindale Physical Card files. Tindale Yarrabah Genealogy Sheet 38. AAR 346/5/3. Harvard and Adelaide Universities Anthropological Expedition Genealogies, 1938-39.
6. Seaton letter to Tindale 28.5.55; in South Australian Museum AA 338/1/38. 'Tja:pukai Grammar, Kuranda Queensland and Research Notes on Queensland Tribes by Norman B. Tindale. 1938-1960+', p.75.
7. Tindale, N. 1953. Natives of Cairns District. Unpublished manuscript. South Australian Museum. Box AA 338/1/38. 'Tja:pukai Grammar, Kuranda Queensland and Research Notes on Queensland Tribes by Norman B. Tindale. 1938-1960+'.
8. Tindale, N. 1953. Natives of Cairns District. Unpublished manuscript. South Australian Museum. Box AA 338/1/38. 'Tja:pukai Grammar, Kuranda Queensland and Research Notes on Queensland Tribes by Norman B. Tindale. 1938-1960+'.
9. Seaton to Tindale 1959. AA 338/1/38. 'Tja:pukai Grammar, Kuranda Queensland and Research Notes on Queensland Tribes by Norman B. Tindale. 1938-1960+'.
10. The terms used by Bulmer seem to be Gugu Yimidhurr as recorded by Haviland (1979: 173).
11. This is later identified by Tindale (1938: 533) as Bulmer's birthplace.
12. Meggit (1966: 283) provides an example of what he calls a "map-cum-letter" functioning as a message stick among the Walpiri in 1953.
13. Tindale also called it a 'map stick' – suggesting that Bulmer's message stick had attributes that did not easily fit Tindale's understanding of a message stick as a particular type of artefact. I elaborate on this innovative quality below. For overviews of Indigenous topographical representations and mapping see Sutton (1998a, 1998b).
14. Most of the kin terms used by Bulmer to indicate these relationships are similar to Gugu Yimidhurr kin terms (Haviland, 1979: 73).
15. It is possible that Bulmer's travels did not actually correspond to the places shown on the message stick. And it is likely that his merging of specific kinship relationships with the places indicated is not always accurate according to current understandings of interests in land. Narrative histories are 'never, simply, factual accounts' (Austin-Broos cited in Henry, 2012: 23). What primarily interests me is that Bulmer inscribes into the message stick a vision of a world of places fully defined by kinship and himself.
16. I can only point to some indications of data that might provide an answer. Mathews (1897) discusses a message stick from the Queensland-NSW border that contains figurative images of the message sender, message deliverer, and message recipient and thereby involves biographical, and possibly autobiographical, elements. Hayley Young 's (2014) Honours thesis drew my attention to these images. Allen points to the use of marks that are like the maker's 'signature' on a spear functioning as message stick and a similar use of a marks in 1935 by Wonggu who made a message stick for Donald Thomson as part of negotiating a peace (Allen, 2015: 122). Thomson noted that Wonggu 'explained that the marks inscribed upon it represented himself sitting down quietly and maintaining peace among the people' (cited in Allen, 2015: 125).

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