

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.

Making the Rainforest Aboriginal: Tindale and Birdsell's foray into deep time

Russell McGREGOR

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In the late 1930s Norman Tindale and Joseph Birdsell identified the inhabitants of the North Queensland rainforests as a distinct race of Indigenous Australians. This classification was a keystone of their attempted reconstruction of the deep past of Australia. According to their narrative, the Aboriginal inhabitants of the rainforests were relicts of the first human occupants of Australia, refugees from later waves of Aboriginal invaders who seized all but the most inhospitable parts of the continent. From the outset, Tindale and Birdsell's argument was burdened with serious problems, both in the qualities they attributed to rainforest people and in their representation of the rainforest environment as a 'refuge'. While Tindale and Birdsell's racial theorising and historical speculations drew some supporters, they failed to win general academic acclamation and by the 1970s were quite thoroughly discredited. Yet the category 'rainforest Aboriginal' survived, disengaged from the reconstruction of Australia's past that had inspired it and anchored instead to the distinctive economy of rainforest subsistence, instantiated in a unique material culture. This paper takes Tindale and Birdsell's relict-race representation of rainforest Aboriginal people as the starting point in an exploration of how European people represented the Aboriginal inhabitants of the North Queensland rainforests over roughly a hundred years, from the 1870s to the 1970s.

□ Tindale, Birdsell, racial classification, North Queensland, rainforest Aboriginal people, artefacts, Australian anthropology

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A RELICT RACE

In the late 1930s, the Adelaide-based ethnologist Norman Tindale and Harvard physical anthropologist Joseph Birdsell created the category 'rainforest Aboriginal people'.¹ They identified the inhabitants of the North Queensland rainforests as a discrete race of Indigenous Australians, akin to the Tasmanians but separate from all other mainland Aboriginal peoples. The most immediately striking characteristic of the rainforest people, Tindale and Birdsell claimed, was their diminutive – 'pygmoid' or 'pygmy'² – stature, although their distinctiveness was also apparent in their cultural, social, artefactual and linguistic attributes as well as in other physical features such as hair texture, physiognomy, skin colour and blood group (Tindale & Birdsell, 1941: 5).

My intention here is not to give the pygmies-in-the-North-Queensland-rainforest narrative yet another run. Keith Windschuttle did that in 2002, with the predictable result of provoking a chorus of critics who pointed out that Tindale and Birdsell's pygmy characterisation had been subjected to close scientific scrutiny and long since discredited (Westaway & Hiscock, 2005; Windschuttle & Gillen, 2002). Rather, my intention is to explore the history of representations of rainforest Aboriginal people, taking Tindale and Birdsell's racial theorising as a starting point. I have no interest in adjudicating on the validity of their theories, or on the extent to which they may have misrepresented the subjects of their investigations. Such adjudications are inevitably subject to the vagaries of time and intellectual fashion. Already in recent years, some archaeologists and other scientists have attempted to revive elements of Tindale and Birdsell's theories of Aboriginal origins which had not long before lost credibility (see for example Thorne, 2005; Webb, 2006). Rather than attempting the impossible task of assessing the correctness of Tindale and Birdsell's theories and representations, my aim here is to trace the antecedents of those intellectual constructs and their trajectories across later years. A comprehensive mapping of all those trajectories is beyond the scope of this (or any other) article, so I devote special attention to the residue of Tindale and Birdsell's representations that persists most strongly today: the continued currency of the category 'rainforest Aboriginal people'.

Tindale and Birdsell claimed the inhabitants of the North Queensland rainforests to be the remnant of a Negrito race that had once peopled the entirety of Australia. Elsewhere on the mainland, the diminutive Negritos had been pushed aside by two later waves of physically larger Aboriginal invaders, surviving into historical times only in Tasmania and in their rainforest fastnesses. Hence their designation of rainforest Aborigines as 'Tasmanoid', though they later applied the label 'Barrinean', after Lake Barrine on the Atherton Tableland (Tindale & Lindsay, 1963: 30). For Tindale and Birdsell, the primary importance of rainforest people's distinctiveness was as evidence for their theory that the Aboriginal population was made up of three successive, racially-distinctive waves of colonisers, against the scientific orthodoxy of the day which asserted the racial homogeneity of the Aboriginal people (see Anderson, 2002: 232-34; McGregor, 1996: 17-18; Prentis, 1995). Their rainforest discovery of the living relicts of the first inhabitants of Australia provided crucial support for the theory.

Tindale and Birdsell acknowledged that over the millennia the rainforest Negritos had intermixed to some degree, physically and culturally, with the surrounding non-Negrito peoples. Nonetheless, they identified twelve tribes inhabiting the 'refuge area' of wet-tropical North Queensland who exhibited strongly Tasmanoid traits. These were (using Tindale and Birdsell's orthography) the Ngatjan, Mamu, Wanjuru, Tjapukai, Barbaram, Idindji, Kongkandji, Buluwai, Djiru, Djirubal, Gulngai and Keramai tribes. Surrounding these were seven tribes (Bandjin, Newegi, Agwamin, Wakaman, Muluridji, Djankun and Irukandji) which constituted 'a transitional type between the nucleus of Tasmanoid tribes and the more normal Australian ones' (Tindale & Birdsell, 1941: 2-3).

Tindale and Birdsell's discovery of the diminutive Negritos of the rainforest was just one element in their reconstruction of the prehistoric past of Australia, but a very important element. Through scrutiny of the living reality of Aboriginal people, as well as the archaeological record, they considered

it possible to recover the story of the human occupation of the Australian land-mass. They sought to look back into deep time, and to do so in North Queensland they singled out the inhabitants of the rainforests as survivors of an age that elsewhere in Australia had passed away.

Tindale and Birdsell drew analogies with other parts of the world. They noted that in Southeast Asia, the ostensible point of origin of the Tasmanoid people, Negrito enclaves still survived in mountainous, jungle-clad 'refuge areas' into which they had been pushed by bigger and better-armed Asian peoples (Tindale & Birdsell, 1941: 4; Tindale & Lindsay, 1963: 23-24). In Western anthropology and in Western representations of otherness more generally, there is a long tradition of locating pygmy Negrito races in mountainous, heavily-forested fastnesses (Roque, 2012). Tindale and Birdsell explicitly linked their racial theorising with this tradition. Moreover, the successive waves of invaders model of territorial occupation was one with which European people were familiar. They knew it applied to the past of Europe itself, as well as Asia and Africa; and since the nineteenth century, Europeans had typically conceived the waves of invaders in racialised terms (Coon, 1939; Etherington, 2011; Poliakov, 1974). Why should Australia be different in this regard? Here, there was no documentary record of the kind that attested to the great invasions and migrations of the Eurasian landmass, so the scholar had to read the past through the available record of racial traits, languages, customs, fossilised bones and a detritus of material culture.

The notion that pre-colonial Australia had witnessed successive waves of invasion appealed to the imaginations of some Australians. On the opening page of the first volume of his *History of Australia* Manning Clark (1962: 3) recounted the three waves of invasion narrative as unquestioned fact. Perhaps it resonated with his career-long yearning to find drama in Australian history.

However, the claim that most captured the public imagination was that pygmies dwelt in Australia. Stories about pygmies in the North Queensland

jungles were recounted in numerous newspapers and magazines between the 1940s and 1970s, usually emphasising the exoticness of the pygmy although occasionally referring to the racial theorising that rendered small stature scientifically significant in Tindale and Birdsell's argument (see for example Lindsay, 1954). Among enthusiasts for the pygmy thesis, Dr R.A. Douglas of Townsville went further than most. At a medical conference at the Townsville General Hospital in 1962 Dr Douglas not only presented a paper entitled 'Pygmies in Australia'; he also presented to delegates a real 'pygmy' man or woman (gender is not clear from newspaper reports) from the Atherton Tablelands. In Douglas's rendition, the rainforest pygmies were even shorter and more racially distinctive than Tindale and Birdsell had claimed, 'about as much like our so-called Aborigine as a dachshund is like a greyhound'.³ However, newspaper reports reveal that several of Douglas's colleagues at the medical conference 'debunked the claims of the speaker saying that the pygmy type found on the Atherton Tableland had been developed through normal type aborigines living in the rainforest area and not being able to find sufficient food on which to develop normally' (Anon, 1962b).

Tall tales about short people in North Queensland reached their zenith (or nadir) in 1982 when the eccentric museum curator and searcher for 'lost civilisations', Rex Gilroy, announced that he was mounting an expedition to locate the spear-wielding pygmy tribesmen who, he maintained, still lived in the jungles near Tully (Anon, 1982a, 1982b, 1982c). While most newspapers recounted Gilroy's claims in a tone of open-mouthed credulity, at least two took the trouble to publish rebuttals by experts, anthropologist David Trigger and geographer Terry Birtles. In the most comprehensive of these, published in the *North Queensland Register*, Birtles accepted that the rainforest dwellers were exceptionally short. In fact he exaggerated their shortness, claiming that they 'rarely exceeded four feet six inches'.⁴ However, Birtles' main contention was that diminutive size did not indicate racial distinctness but was 'the result of generations of

adaptation to the rainforest environment, with its comparative shortage of protein-rich foods' (Anon, 1982d). Birtles had made the same claims – including the exaggeration of their shortness – at a conference of the Australian Institute of Geographers in 1978 (Birtles, 1978: 9-11).

In view of the excitement aroused by the supposed presence of pygmies in North Queensland, it is worth pausing to consider its historical antecedents. Tindale and Birdsell themselves made occasional references to the historical record to buttress their claims, citing in particular the Norwegian zoological collector Carl Lumholtz, who lived among Aboriginal people on the upper Herbert River for fourteen months in the early 1880s. Their citation of Lumholtz on the alleged exceptional shortness of rainforest people is misleading. In fact, Lumholtz merely remarked in his 1889 book *Among Cannibals* that 'Most of [the inhabitants of the upper Herbert River] were slender and tolerably well built, though on the average small. Their height varied greatly' (Lumholtz, 1889a: 77, 129-130). In a contemporaneous journal article, he stated that 'while some were tall and well shaped there were others of a smaller and weaker stature' (Lumholtz, 1889b: 532). Tindale and Birdsell (1941: 2) tried to account for the variability Lumholtz observed by claiming that he conducted his research among 'transitional' tribes, beyond 'the relatively unmixed pygmoid group'. However, Lumholtz's writings and maps show that he conducted his investigations squarely within the territory Tindale designated Keramai, one of the supposed 'nuclear' Tasmanoid tribes.

Some other nineteenth and early twentieth-century observers mentioned a degree of shortness among rainforest Aboriginal people – but it was never more than a mention. Self-appointed expert on the Aborigines, Archibald Meston, described 'the coast range blacks from Cardwell to Cooktown' as generally 'short and wiry, with good chest development, thin legs, often slightly curved, and surprisingly small hands and feet' (Meston, 1889: 18). This was a mere incidental observation, and neither in Meston's writings nor in the numerous photographs he took on expeditions, did he represent rainforest people's

shortness as exceptional. And Meston was a man obsessed with masculine physicality, who could be expected to remark upon exceptional smallness of stature if he saw it. Visiting Swedish entomologist Eric Mjöberg (1918: 143, 167) described the rainforest Aboriginal people of the Atherton Tableland as 'slightly smaller' or 'as a rule, somewhat smaller than those living on the plains'. None of these commentators said more than that rainforest people showed some tendency to shortness – a long way from claiming they were pygmies.

Many colonial-era observers made no comment at all on the stature of rainforest Aboriginal people, suggesting that they found nothing exceptional about it. Others claimed them to be big people. One of the first Europeans to comment on the stature of rainforest people was the explorer George Elphinstone Dalrymple, who in 1865 characterised the people of the ranges behind Rockingham Bay (Tindale's Keramai tribe) as 'large muscular men' who were 'ferocious, cunning' and formidable enough to threaten the survival of the new settlement of Cardwell (Dalrymple, 1865: 202). He used similar words eight years later to describe a group near the Macalister Range (Tindale's Buluwai or possibly Irukandji tribe): 'large and powerful men' possessing a 'most ferocious expression of countenance' (Dalrymple, 1874: 19). At nearby Trinity Harbour (Tindale's Idindji people) Dalrymple (1874: 17) found that the 'blacks are big hulking fellows, of a lighter copper-colour than we are accustomed to see to the southward'. There is no trace of pygmies, or even small Aboriginal people, in Dalrymple's accounts of his jungle adventures. Nor is there in Christie Palmerston's. Although Palmerston's explorations in the 1880s took him through at least six of Tindale's twelve nuclear Tasmanoid tribes, he nowhere suggested that the people he encountered were small. The only comments he made on their stature were to occasionally note exceptionally tall individuals, and to state generally of rainforest people that the 'old men are of good stature. The young men are lithe muscular fellows' (Palmerston, 1887: 240). Perhaps the most notable feature of pre-Tindale-and-Birdsell commentary on rainforest

Aboriginal peoples' stature is inconsistency. In any case, no European observer in the first couple of generations of contact with rainforest Aboriginal people described them as even approximating pygmy stature.

Nonetheless, in mid-twentieth century Australia pygmy tales exerted an irresistible appeal, and it was easy to find a photograph of an exceptionally short individual from the rainforest to embellish a story in the popular press (see for example Anon, 1982b). However, in scholarly circles Tindale and Birdsell's relict race characterisation of rainforest people did not fare so well, never gaining general acquiescence among anthropologists and related disciplinary experts. Some, such as F.D. McCarthy (1942: 35-36), lent their support. More were forthrightly hostile, including Professor A.P. Elkin (1964: 19), who as an anthropologist and public intellectual was arguably the most influential shaper of popular attitudes toward Aboriginal people in the mid-twentieth century (McGregor, 2011). Elkin's friend N.W.G. Macintosh, Challis Professor of Anatomy at the University of Sydney, in collaboration with Stan Larnach, published several craniological studies which showed no evidence of Negrito characteristics in rainforest Aboriginal skulls, and no significant variation between those and the skulls of other Queensland Aboriginal people (Larnach & Macintosh, 1969; Macintosh & Larnach, 1973). Macintosh did not confine his criticisms to scholarly monographs. In a November 1963 ABC radio broadcast, Macintosh described Birdsell's explanation of Aboriginal origins as 'a romantic and stimulating theory, but it is at the same time highly speculative. In support of it at the moment we have absolutely no positive archaeological evidence' (Macintosh, 1963).

Tindale and Birdsell's claims about the cultural cohesiveness of the rainforest tribes, and their socio-cultural distinctiveness from their neighbours, also failed to square with social anthropological studies. At the very time Tindale and Birdsell conducted their investigations, R. Lauriston Sharp published a study which grouped the Aboriginal tribes of North Queensland into nine clusters on the basis of their 'common features of totemic

organization'. Sharp's totemic classification cut straight through Tindale and Birdsell's rainforest category, with the Yirkandji, Kungandji and Yidindji tribes adhering to what Sharp called the 'Yir Yiront totemic system', while the (Um)Barbarem, Mutju, Tjirbal, Mamu and Ngatjan tribes conformed to the 'Olkol' type. Sharp made it clear that these differences in totemic systems correlated with major differences in culture and social organisation (Sharp, 1939). Very little ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in the North Queensland rainforests between Tindale and Birdsell's late 1930s expedition and Christopher Anderson's investigations in the 1980s; and the latter was in Kuku Yalandji territory, slightly to the north of Tindale and Birdsell's Negrito zone. However, a linguist, R.M.W. Dixon, was active in the relevant area in the 1960s and 1970s.

Dixon's investigations undercut the linguistic unity of the rainforest tribes postulated by Tindale and Birdsell. Contradicting the latter's claims about the uniqueness of rainforest Aboriginal languages, Dixon found that 'all the languages but Mbabaram fit perfectly well into the pattern of Australian linguistics' and even Mbabaram was only 'a little eccentric phonetically and phonologically'. Tindale and Birdsell had specified Mbabaram as the prototype rainforest language; Dixon found its closest relatives to be not the languages of the other eleven 'nuclear' rainforest tribes but rather those spoken by tribes further to the west (Dixon, 1966: 114-115, 1972: 347-352). Moreover, he found that a 'major linguistic boundary – between the Yidinj and Dyirbal languages – runs right through the middle of the Tindale-Birdsell "Barrinean" area' (Dixon, 1976: 231). The discreteness of the rainforest tribes, essential to Tindale and Birdsell's reconstruction of Australian prehistory, failed to withstand the scrutiny of linguists, social anthropologists and anatomists.

Yet the category 'rainforest Aboriginal people', first delineated by Tindale and Birdsell, survived. It still survives today. Perhaps 'rainforest' is just a handy label for aggregating several Aboriginal groups for certain purposes. But more seems to be involved. The map of Aboriginal Australia

issued by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies includes, on the North Queensland coast, a tribal cluster designated 'rainforest'. The Wet Tropics Management Authority published a journal entitled *Rainforest Aboriginal News*. Indigenous-owned enterprises such as the Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park and the Girringun Aboriginal Corporation proudly promote their rainforest credentials to tourists and art-buyers, both Australian and international. In these and numerous similar instances, 'rainforest' refers to a quite specific patch of rainforest that roughly coincides with Tindale and Birdsell's Negrito area. In fact, there were, and are, tracts of rainforest all along the east coast of the continent, sometimes covering vast areas as on the Lamington Plateau in southern Queensland and the Big Scrub in northern New South Wales. The combination of the words 'rainforest' and 'Aboriginal' refers particularly to a specific place and people: those identified by Tindale and Birdsell in the late 1930s. Before enquiring further into why this should be so, another aspect of Tindale and Birdsell's rainforest writings warrants scrutiny.

THE HOSTILE JUNGLE

Tindale and Birdsell represented the rainforest as an extraordinarily inhospitable environment, so ill-suited to human life that no-one would live there unless compelled by the direst of need. It was this that made the rainforest a 'refuge area' for small, weak people fleeing more robust newcomers, and a human museum for modern-day anthropologists seeking to peer back into the past. In Tindale and Birdsell's account, the rainforest environment was so forbidding as to block the invasion of those who took the entirety of the rest of the continent. Tasmania, they claimed, had become a refuge for the Negritos when it was cut off by rising sea levels at the end of the Ice Age. The North Queensland rainforests, by contrast, are easily accessible from adjacent open forests and coasts, so if later waves of Aboriginal invaders did not invade there, it must have been because they considered rainforests not worth the taking. Tindale and Birdsell explicitly said

so, attributing the survival of the North Queensland Negritos to their 'isolation, in a relatively inaccessible and uninviting environment, not sought by the usual Australian tribes' (Tindale & Birdsell, 1941: 8; Tindale, 1959: 41). Tindale (1940: 149) stated that 'Dense wet forests become refuge areas, only to be sought by those less fortunate tribes whose physical and mental inferiorities condemn them to the least desirable parts of primitive man's environment'. It was an interpretation to which he remained committed throughout his long career, Tindale repeating the above sentence verbatim in his 1974 classic, *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia* (Tindale, 1974: 56). This, perhaps, constitutes the nadir in European representations of the rainforests.

Where did such a negative assessment come from? European commentators, including those from colonial North Queensland, had long remarked on the fact that rainforests are uncomfortable places to live in, eternally damp, gloomy and infested with leeches, ticks, mites and other pests. But Tindale and Birdsell's representation was of an entirely different order, claiming the rainforest to be not merely uncomfortable but so inhospitable as to repel invaders.

Colonial-era commentators on North Queensland rainforest people generally claimed that they had good access to the necessities of life. Many claimed food was abundant. R.A. Johnstone, a Native Police Sub-Inspector who participated in Dalrymple's 1873 expedition, stated that it was 'a sure indication of good country when the aboriginals are numerous, as they depend entirely on Nature to provide them with the necessities of life, and there in the valley of the Barron the jungle supplied them with fruits, roots and game in abundance' (Johnstone, 1903). Mjöberg (1918: 180-193) noted that the rainforest tribes 'have at their free disposal, the rich and lush rainforest with all that it contains in the way of buds and tender shoots, maturing fruits and all its wildlife', which provided a generous larder. Some colonial commentators remarked on specific deficiencies in rainforest Aboriginal diets, noting particularly the paucity of flesh foods and corresponding reliance on plants such as nuts, tubers and fruits. They

noted, too, that many food plants had to be processed by prolonged pounding and leaching to remove toxic chemicals. Lumholtz, who seems to have eaten these processed plant foods only when driven by necessity, stated that they were 'wellnigh tasteless', almost 'indigestible', and 'very unwholesome' (Lumholtz, 1889a: 230-231). On the other hand, Christie Palmerston, who lived off the resources of the rainforest for months at a time, remarked on 'the abundance and variety of good food these jungles contain', significantly adding: 'flesh excepted' (Palmerston, 1882: 146-147). On this point – the scarcity of game in the rainforests – there was near consensus. Yet the nutritional consequences of that fact were uncertain, for as Lumholtz (1889a) pointed out, his Girramay hosts did not live permanently in the rainforest but moved seasonally into adjacent open forest and grassland to hunt game such as wallabies.

According to some colonial commentators, an over-reliance on vegetable food sharpened the rainforest peoples' cannibal appetites. Christie Palmerston (1887: 238, 1882: 147) explained that the 'scrub blacks ... don't get much meat food, and their cannibalistic propensities would appear to have become developed in answer to Nature's call for a meat diet'. In similar vein, Meston noted that the Aboriginal inhabitants of the Bellenden-Ker range were 'cannibals of a particularly bad type'. He claimed that 'all Australian tribes' indulged in cannibalism at times, but cannibal feasting was exceptionally prevalent among the rainforest people, probably due to 'an irrestrainable craving for flesh food, in a violent reaction against prolonged vegetarianism' (Meston, 1889: 18-19, 1924). However, shortage of meat aside, Meston believed rainforest people had access to abundant food. Of course, nineteenth-century commentators believed all Aboriginal people lived a hand-to-mouth existence, but those who observed rainforest Aboriginal people made no suggestion that they eked out a harder or more meagre subsistence than Aborigines elsewhere. Like Tindale and Birdsell's comments on rainforest Aboriginal stature, their assessment of the rainforest as a place to live does not match the assessments of European observers in the earliest generations of contact.

Later commentators, too, made very different assessments of the rainforest environment to those of Tindale and Birdsell. Dixon not only undermined Tindale and Birdsell's linguistic speculations; he also contradicted their claim that the rainforest was an inhospitable environment. In Dixon's account the rainforest was a bountiful place, 'so rich in flesh and vegetable food [that] these tribes were able to occupy territories much smaller than those of most interior tribes'. He added that most tribal territories encompassed 'a number of quite different types of habitat and vegetation', not just rainforest, so these tribes, far from being impoverished, had access to an unusually wide diversity of resources (Dixon, 1976: 207-208, 1972: 347).

On the basis of his linguistic researches (combined with the recent discovery that the Atherton Tablelands rainforests were comparatively recent, probably dating from no more than 7,600 years ago) Dixon proposed his own hypotheses on early tribal movements in the region. He suggested that 'proto-Dyirbal' speakers were once confined to the coastal rainforests in the southern parts of the Wet Tropics, with Yidin-speakers to their north and Mbabaram-speakers to their north-west, in the then-sclerophyll forests of the Atherton Tablelands. Vegetation patterns changed and at the same time the Dyirbal population grew, expanding territorially at the expense of the Mbabaram who were pushed 'out of the pleasant tableland environment into a small, arid and rather undesirable territory on top of the dividing range' (Dixon, 1972: 351). This is a much smaller-scale speculation than Tindale and Birdsell's continent-wide projections, but one point stands out. In Dixon's model, the rainforest, far from being a refuge for the weak, was in possession by the strong, who pushed their weaker neighbours into less desirable, drier and more open country.

As noted above, by the time Dixon published these speculations, the rainforest itself was being historicised. Ecological studies, particularly by CSIRO scientists Len Webb and Geoff Tracey from the 1960s onward, revealed the northern rainforests to be more diversified and dynamic environments than previously imagined. Webb

(1973) also wrote on Aboriginal plant-uses and environmental impacts in areas including the North Queensland rainforests. Palaeoecological and palynological studies conducted in the 1970s showed that the rainforests had been massively transformed over the millennia, expanding and contracting according to climatic shifts and the changes wrought by humans. Peter Kershaw, who conducted palynological studies at Lynch's Crater and Bromfield Swamp on the Atherton Tablelands, suggested that a gradual replacement of rainforest by sclerophyll vegetation in this area between 38,000 and 27,000 years BP was 'partly a result of ... decrease in effective rainfall and partly a result of burning by aboriginal man' (Kershaw, 1978: 160; see also Kershaw, 1975, 1976). By the 1980s Kershaw was asserting with increasing assurance that Aboriginal burning practices had been a major, though not the sole, factor in determining the extent and distribution of rainforest on the Atherton Tableland on a time-scale going back 40,000 years (Kershaw, 1983: 678, 1986). The rainforest was not a stable environment, and one of the causes of instability was the presence of humans.

Ironically, Tindale was a pioneer scholar of Indigenous environmental agency, particularly through the use of fire and sometimes with specific reference to the North Queensland rainforests. In their 'Tasmanoid Tribes' article Tindale and Birdsell (1941: 4) alluded to the likelihood that the open country adjacent to North Queensland rainforests had been created 'by the fires of past generations of the native inhabitants'. This theme was much more prominent in Tindale's later work. In 1959 – a decade before Rhys Jones (1969) coined the evocative term 'fire-stick farming' – Tindale argued that Aboriginal firing practices had significantly shaped the biological configuration of this continent, even in the relatively fire-resistant environment of the tropical rainforests. Drawing on research he and Birdsell had conducted twenty years earlier, Tindale stated that:

In the rainforests of the Atherton Plateau there are often to be met such enclaves of grassland as well as curious patches of wet sclerophyll forest. According to the views of local negrito aborigines, as expressed to me in 1938, such areas arise from their occasionally successful practice of setting fire to rainforest patches during the dry spells which periodically occur and cause the usually wet forest floor to become a giant tinder box.

Since the burning of the rainforest is regarded as a useful hunting expedient, fires are likely to have been lit by many past generations of men, and the cumulative effects of the practice on the forest cover may have been very great. Perhaps it is correct to assume that man has had such a profound effect on the distributions of forest and grassland that true primaeval forest may be far less common in Australia than is generally realized, as indeed it is relatively rare in all lands where man has intruded for lengthy periods of time. (Tindale, 1959: 42-43)

Tindale continued to argue this line in later works (Tindale, 1976: 21-23).

There were, then, two narrative lines running through Tindale's writings on the rainforest environment. One, the narrative of refuge, represented the rainforest as more or less constant over immense periods of time. The other represented the rainforests as malleable, shaped particularly by their Aboriginal inhabitants' use of fire. These two narratives are not contradictory, but nor do they sit comfortably together. The former narrative emphasised environmental stability, an essential quality if the rainforests were to offer refuge for a people who elsewhere on the continent had disappeared thousands of years ago. The latter narrative emphasised environmental instability, an inescapable consequence of the ecological agency Tindale wanted to show they exercised.

A RESIDUE OF ARTEFACTS

Tindale and Birdsell devoted a section of their 1941 'Tasmanoid Tribes' article to material culture. In it they referred to the 'large decorated fighting shields', the 'single-handed, flat-bladed and long, wooden, fighting sword', 'beaten bark blankets' and the 'highly characteristic' woven cane baskets that were more or less distinctive to the inhabitants of the North Queensland rainforests. They also referred to the 'specialized techniques of food gathering such as would develop in a dense rainforest environment', including the extended washing, leaching, roasting and fermentation of seeds and nuts with high alkaloid content and the use of climbing-canes to ascend into the forest canopy where much of the scant food resources could be found (Tindale & Birdsell, 1941: 7-8). The distinctiveness of rainforest material culture was adduced to buttress Tindale and Birdsell's central contention of the racial discreteness of the people who made and used those artefacts. Material culture was not particularly prominent in their argument, but in putting it forward Tindale and Birdsell were on firmer historical ground than in their claims about either rainforest people's stature or the status of their environment as a refuge.

It was the distinctiveness of rainforest people's material culture that had elicited most interest from Europeans since the moment of first contact. Within days of setting out on the first European intrusion into the North Queensland rainforests in 1848, Edmund Kennedy's party 'came into a native encampment, consisting of eighteen or twenty gunyahs', all of which were 'neatly and strongly built', and one of which was huge, 'eighteen feet long, seven feet wide and fourteen feet high'. Inside this hut they found a large, brightly-painted wooden shield and several long, hardwood swords (Carron, 1849: 15-16). It was items such as these that excited early European observers. Travelling over the ranges west of Cardwell in 1865, Dalrymple found numerous clearings where Aborigines had built 'clusters of small, round-topped huts', interconnected by 'broad, hard-beaten path[s]'. In his characteristically

romantic style, Dalrymple (1865: 205) compared the scene with 'the beautiful mountain villages of Ceylon or of the islands of the Pacific'. Prospector James Venture Mulligan, travelling northward across the Atherton Tableland in 1877, encountered what he called 'townships, which consist of well thatched gunyahs, big enough to hold five or six darkies. We counted eleven townships since we came to the edge of the scrub, and we have only travelled four miles along it' (quoted in Henry, 2012: 31). The implication was that rainforest people led comparatively sedentary lives, a point Mjöberg made explicit in his statement that 'the natives in this dense rainforest region live a more sedentary lifestyle than the typical nomadic tribes of the west' (quoted in Ferrier, 2006: 13).

The distinctive weapons of rainforest people drew particular comment. Dalrymple provided one of the earliest, reasonably detailed descriptions of rainforest weaponry in 1865. Exploring the ranges inland from Cardwell, he found Aboriginal people bearing large softwood shields, 'painted in blue, black, red, and yellow bands, in a quaint zigzag pattern, found on all shields in this part of the colony' and wielding hardwood swords, 'about 5 feet long and 6 inches broad, and shaped with a curve, and point like an infantry sword' (Dalrymple, 1865: 205). However, it seems that he did not witness how the sword and shield were actually wielded in battle. The first published descriptions of that were by Lumholtz and Palmerston in the 1880s, who noted the semi-ritualised nature of such battles. Alluding to the possible totemic or spiritual significance of shield designs, Palmerston (1884: 172) stated that 'Each tribe has a different design on the face of its shields', the designs being painted partly with human blood extracted by the artist poking sharp objects up his nose. Mjöberg (1918: 178) offered a more refined image, attributing rainforest Aboriginal people with aesthetic sensibilities congruent with the modernist movement then sweeping through Europe. He observed that on rainforest shields, the 'colours are applied in the most fantastic patterns. Some of the large wooden shields that I brought back from the Mulgrave Valley, where the

Aborigines were particularly fond of beautiful and brilliant colours, show actual cubistic and futuristic tendencies, quite comparable to Grunewald's most extraordinary works'.⁵

Implements used for food processing elicited almost equal interest. These included large, multi-pitted nut-cracking stones, grooved slate grating stones (or *morah*), beaten bark cloths (used for collecting ground and grated plant foods as well as for a body covering) and bicornual baskets made of split lawyer cane. The last of these attracted special interest for a distinctive feature of their manufacture. As Lumholtz (1889a: 193) explained: 'Only the men plait baskets – the women never'. Walter Roth (1904: 28) added that though bicornual baskets were 'certainly manufactured by men only', they were 'utilised by both sexes'. For European men of the Victorian and Edwardian eras, the fact that basket-weaving was an exclusively male preserve seemed odd indeed. Meston, who was exceptionally preoccupied with masculinity even by contemporary standards, expressed particular surprise, noting that elsewhere in Australia Aboriginal men considered bag- and basket-making 'beneath their dignity' (Meston, 1904: 6). On why rainforest men indulged in this erstwhile female practice, Meston offered no explanation, but like other contemporary commentators he singled out male basket-weaving as a practice unique to the rainforest.

Mjöberg (1918: 173) specified four categories of rainforest artefact 'which distinguish their makers from all others ... These are their water bags and their cane baskets ... the large battle sword and the colourful and bright giant wooden shields ... Each of these four artefacts are exclusive and specific to the inhabitants of the rainforests in question'. This was part of Mjöberg's larger argument that those 'tribes that inhabit the immense rainforests in north Queensland, have adapted themselves very well to the dense jungle vegetation', where they 'exist in harmony with all other creatures and elements in the huge and multifarious realm of nature' (Mjöberg, 1918: 180). Mjöberg understood rainforest Aboriginal peoples' adaptations to their environment as conscious and deliberate strategies for wresting a living from their damp jungle lands,

which resulted in their possessing a material culture distinct from that of Aboriginal groups inhabiting drier, more open country. Before Tindale and Birdsell in the late 1930s, this was as close as anyone came to distinguishing a distinctive rainforest cultural configuration. But unlike Tindale and Birdsell, Mjöberg did not claim the rainforest inhabitants to be racially or in any other essential way distinct from other Aboriginal people. He contended that Aborigines across Australia were 'a very uniform and homogeneous people', the observable differences among them being due to environmental factors. It was adaptation to environment, Mjöberg argued, that accounted for the extent to which rainforest tribes differed, in their mode of subsistence and material culture, from other Aboriginal groups (Mjöberg, 1918: 143).

Later studies of rainforest material culture continued the emphasis on environmental adaptation. In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, Queensland Museum associates Stan Colliver and Frank Woolston drew attention to the sophistication and efficacy of rainforest Aboriginal technologies (see for example Woolston & Colliver, 1973; Woolston, [1983]). They expressed endorsement of Tindale and Birdsell's Tasmanoid theory, but this was inconsequential to the central thrust of their investigations into Aboriginal adaptations to the rainforest environment. Writing in the 1970s, the geographer David Harris (1978) argued that the distinctive material culture of rainforest Aboriginals, and to some extent their social organisation and customs as well, were outcomes of their adaptation to their unique environment. 'Far from being "simple hunter-gatherers"', he declared, 'they were ecological sophisticates who exploited the resources of the rain forests extensively and selectively' (Harris, 1974). As the image of 'ecological sophisticates' was increasingly fastened on Aboriginal people from the 1970s onward, the inhabitants of the rainforests came to be seen as stewards of an extraordinarily rich and diverse environment. From this perspective, Tindale and Birdsell's racial theorising held dwindling interest, but their categorisation of Aboriginal groups on environmental criteria retained its pertinence.

CONCLUSION

Tindale and Birdsell created the category 'rainforest Aboriginal' as a crucial component of their attempted reconstruction of the deep human past of Australia. In this narrative, the Aboriginal inhabitants of the North Queensland rainforests stood as the living relicts of the first human occupants of this continent. From the outset, this characterisation of the Aboriginal people of the wet tropics was burdened with serious problems, both in the qualities (physical, cultural and linguistic) it attributed to the people and in its representation of their environment as a 'refuge'. While the rainforest-people-as-relicts characterisation drew some supporters, it failed to win general academic acclamation, and by the 1970s was quite thoroughly discredited. Yet the category 'rainforest Aboriginal' survived, disengaged from the historical reconstruction that had inspired it and anchored instead to the distinctive economy of rainforest subsistence, instantiated in a distinctive technology and culture.

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❏ ENDNOTES

- 1 Tindale first referred to the distinctiveness of 'the inhabitants of the rain scrub areas around Cairns' in a letter to his mentor, J.B. Cleland, on 23 October 1938; J.B. Cleland Papers, University of Adelaide Archives, box 1, folder 1.
- 2 In scientific publications Tindale and Birdsell designated these people 'pygmoid', but in writings aimed at a popular audience simplified the terminology to 'pygmy'; see for example Tindale, 1962a, 1962b.
- 3 R.A. Douglas, unpublished typescript lecture notes attached to letter, Douglas to F.S. Colliver, 2 August 1962, Queensland Museum Archives, F.S. Colliver Collection, box 9. See also Anon 1962a.
- 4 According to Westaway & Hiscock (2005: 143) Birdsell's original data gave an average height for Kuranda Aboriginal men of five feet two and a half inches.
- 5 Mjöberg was evidently referring to the contemporary Swedish modernist artist, Isaac Grünewald, not the better-known Renaissance German painter, Matthias Grünewald.

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