

# **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

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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.

# Aboriginal Artefacts, Collectors and the Wet Tropics: an introduction

Shelley GREER, Rosita HENRY, Russell McGREGOR and Michael WOOD

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This introduction raises issues concerning transactions involving Aboriginal artefacts of the North Queensland Wet Tropics. We highlight relationships between artefacts, persons and place, as well as the importance of understanding the nature of exchange and concepts of ownership in the creation and collection of artefacts.

❏ Aboriginal artefacts, artefact collectors, North Queensland, Wet Tropics, Museums

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Went to the Lagoon to see the Blacks fight & there were several good set tos & 'Warrior' got a spear in his groin & another in his back. He was using my second shield, broke the former & got some 10 spears broken in shield. (Boyd, 1882-1897)

On Sunday 21 January 1883 at about 11am, John Archibald Boyd, ethnographic collector and manager of Ripple Creek sugarcane plantation near Ingham in North Queensland, went hunting, as he did almost every Sunday. He was not too happy that day as he only managed to pick up one goose out of the six he shot at. Moreover, he tore his pants and got his knees badly cut while searching for two of the geese, which had fallen into the rushes, and also lost a wallaby. He decided to head home around 3pm and for some entertainment went to a nearby lagoon to see the 'Blacks fight'. It is likely that this fight was a dispute resolution battle of the type described by Carl Lumholtz who witnessed one nearby (at Herbert Vale) during the same year (1883). Lumholtz (1889: 119) describes such battles as 'a meeting for contest, where the blacks assemble from many "lands" in order to decide their disputes by combat'. He notes that the participants are 'exceedingly skilful in parrying, so that they are seldom wounded' but that 'the spears easily penetrate the shields, and sometimes injure the bearer, who is then regarded as disqualified and must declare himself beaten' (1889: 124).

Clearly, Warrior, one of the protagonists at the event Boyd witnessed, was well known to him as he was using a shield that Boyd had previously obtained and considered his own. Boyd may have given the shield to Warrior to use for the fight because he had actually purchased it from him and was aware that this was on the understanding that Warrior could take it back whenever he needed to use it. There are indications here of a complex transactional relationship between Boyd and Warrior. Boyd's diary reveals that he purchased a shield on 5 October 1882 for some tobacco and money, only a few weeks after arriving at Ripple Creek. If it was Warrior from whom Boyd obtained this particular shield, had Warrior understood the transaction as commodity

exchange? Or did Warrior think of the shield as inalienable and that the exchange would initiate a continuing relationship with Boyd? It appears that Boyd was somewhat sympathetic to the latter understanding because he seems to have had no problem lending Warrior the shield to use in battle and he did not express dismay at the shield being damaged in the process.

This collection of papers concerns transactions, such as the above, involving artefacts of the North Queensland Wet Tropics. We focus on the collection, exchange and curatorship of particular artefacts, and on the transformation of ideas concerning the peoples who originally made them. Our focus on transactions arises from our interest in exchange relationships through time both among Aboriginal peoples in the rainforest region and between them and early artefact collectors. Our concern is with the specific nature of the social interactions between individuals in the context of the transference of things between them, and how both things and relations become transformed in the process of the interaction. Marilyn Strathern and Eric Hirsch (2004: 8) define transactions as

...a general human facility or inclination, here the ability to compute ratios of values, that is, render something exchangeable by expressing one set of values in terms of another. But that is only half of it. If we talk of transactions we are also talking of specific social interactions, of events at which such conversions have taken place, and thus of a deal or negotiation which has fixed the values on that occasion.

Such a definition informs the papers in this volume, which derive from research conducted for an ARC Discovery project entitled 'Objects of Possession: Artefacts Transactions in the Wet Tropics of North Queensland 1870-2013'. Our research for the larger project examines how artefact collectors, Indigenous producers and their descendants, museums and the state have helped create and transform various rights and interests in the objects transacted and collected (Penny, 2002: 196; Peterson et al., 2008; McDougall & Davidson, 2008). Building on the work



of scholars such as Reynolds (1987), Khan (1993, 1996, 2008), McDougall and Davidson (2008), Peterson et al. (2008) and Ferrier (2006) we examine various collectors such as Hermann Klaatsch, Eric Mjöberg, Walter Roth, Norman Tindale, Archibald Meston, J.A. Boyd and others, to reveal their understandings of the nature of their transactions with Aboriginal people and with museums.

Our work explores the ways in which artefacts, persons, and the specific cultural contexts associated with artefacts are attached, and detached, from each other to create forms of identity linked to property claims. These forms of identity may generate tensions between individual autonomy and ideas of communal property in relation to artefacts. For example, Aboriginal artists who are publically recognised for their personal skills and talents are, nevertheless, culturally expected to navigate communal intellectual property issues and group-rights to the objects and images they use to inspire their creative works.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was necessary for collectors, museums and Aboriginal producers operating in a new North Queensland market to ensure comparability amongst artefacts from this region. The work of collectors on provenance and representativeness often significantly contributed to the creation of different, if contested, identities for Aboriginal people living in the Wet Tropics (Tindale, 1959). Collectors recognised that, to varying degrees, the objects they collected were embedded in social and spatial relations relevant to the Aboriginal people associated with the collected artefacts. This recognition took a range of forms, but in all cases it involved adjudication by the collectors on the definition and location of Aboriginal interests in the artefacts.

Crucial to our project is uncovering the collectors' claims, evident in their notebooks, diaries, artefact documentation and published material, to have legitimately acquired rights in artefacts. Collectors created these forms of 'ownership' to persuade themselves, the state and the museums that they did indeed have rights in the property they sent to

museums and other institutions. But they also often recorded details of transactions involving variations of deceit, theft, under-pricing and other forms of inadequate reciprocity.

Collectors often strongly identified with their collections through the process of documenting, analysing and displaying them. In addition to being reflections of market demand, collections are also understood to reflect the 'personality' and 'interests' of the collector. The collectors were regarded as the authors of their collections and were able to stamp their own identities on these artefacts so that now the collections are typically identified with the collector (as in 'the Roth Collection').

The identification of artefacts predominantly with those who collected them as opposed to those who originally created them operates to efface any continuing rights that the creators might claim in the artefacts. Our research reveals that many Aboriginal people have resisted such alienating practices, asserting their enduring relationships to collected artefacts by emphasising idioms of both property and personhood. For example, an object might be valued because it is infused with ancestral spirit and/or revered as embodying actual social relationships, such as links to a particular person who created it.

Our research combines the history of collectors' and Aboriginal claims over artefacts with a history of official conceptions of state and museum property rights in artefacts collected from the region. For example, Roth's sale of his artefact collection from North Queensland to the Australian Museum in 1905 was raised in an inquiry into his activities (Khan, 2008). This suggests that even a hundred years ago the property rights of collectors in artefacts were ambiguous and could be contested. While museums have only recently been subject to moral and legal pressure about the way artefacts were initially collected, the Roth case indicates that this kind of pressure has a long history. Neither museums nor collectors secured property rights in artefacts unencumbered by the circumstances of the initial transactions with Aboriginal people.



Our approach is grounded in current debates in anthropology about relationships between objects and people (Bell & Gleisner, 2009; Busse, 2008; Chua & Salmond, 2012; Gell, 1996; Herle, 2008; Hoskins, 2006; Strathern, 2004). Some kinds of identification with artefacts imply an intrinsic or inalienable link between person and object (Weiner, 1992; Pannell, 1994). This raises three key questions. Firstly, how do the different agents involved in artefact transactions, including the creators, collectors, curators and museums represent an artefact as being strongly, or weakly, imbued with the attributes of any person involved in the production, circulation and display of the artefact. In other words, in what sense is an artefact itself represented as constitutive of the agent's self and sense of identity, rather than as something external to that self or person (Munn, 1984; Morphy, 1991). A second question is how artefacts retain an intrinsic connection with a culture, cosmology and sense of place. Thirdly, there is the question of how tensions between individual and group identities are negotiated in relation to objects. These three questions thread through the papers in this collection.

Given our focus on rainforest artefacts and people, we begin the volume with a paper by Russell McGregor, that traces the historical development of the concept of 'rainforest Aboriginal people'. The paper challenges some of the taken-for-granted assumptions that surround this construct. McGregor focuses on the studies of Norman Tindale and J.B. Birdsell who identified Aboriginal people living in the North Queensland rainforest as a distinct race: descendants of the original inhabitants of the continent who sought the rainforest as a refuge from subsequent human migrations. He shows that the concept of 'rainforest Aboriginal people' was created by these two anthropologists to advance their (now discredited) theory on the ancient process by which the Australian continent was peopled. McGregor's paper reveals that while Tindale and Birdsell's racialised construct has been discredited, it has been replaced by a new, environmentally-driven concept of 'rainforest Aboriginal people' which shares some crucial attributes with Tindale and Birdsell's original categorisation. In tracing this transformation, McGregor's paper contextualises subsequent papers in this volume.

In the second paper, archaeologists Alice Buhrich, Felise Goldfinch and Shelley Greer provide another conceptual discussion, this time focused on the rainforest as a region and issues of boundary definition. While McGregor examined the changing conceptions of 'rainforest Aboriginal people', this paper uses similarities and differences in the Aboriginal rock art within and beyond the rainforest region as evidence of a wide range of connections and transactions between Aboriginal groups in the past. Buhrich, Goldfinch and Greer show that while there are general similarities in much of the rainforest rock art, there are also clear differences that suggest connections with Aboriginal people in southeast Cape York Peninsula to the north and the Dry Tropics to the south. They propose that the rock art is suggestive of the ceremonial exchange that was a vibrant and recurrent aspect of Aboriginal life in the past. They further propose that particular areas that exhibit marked differences in rock-art style could be conceived as 'zones of engagement': places where people gathered specifically for the purpose of ceremonial exchange. This paper reminds us that Aboriginal people in the past were frequently engaged in transactions of various kinds, a point that is particularly pertinent when considering the transactions that later ensued between them and collectors, and the transactions that are taking place in the contemporary world among Aboriginal artists, objects and the museums in which they are held. Such transactions are the focus of the next five papers.

Maureen Fuery and Russell McGregor's paper explores the collecting activities and ethnographic writings of Walter Roth around the turn of the twentieth century, linking these with his role as a senior Protector of Aboriginals in Queensland. At its most basic, his work in each domain facilitated his activities in the other, but the interconnections were often more complicated and sometimes conflictive. Fuery and McGregor provide detail on Roth's collection, his controversial career as Protector and his resignation following a very public scandal over the sale of his collection to the Australian Museum. They position his ethnographic work within the history of early twentieth-century

Australian anthropology, noting in particular how Roth's studies differed from those of his eminent contemporaries, Spencer and Gillen. Although Roth, like other anthropologists at the time, accepted evolutionary explanations for human cultural diversity, he did not obtrude the evolutionary framework in his ethnographic studies. Instead, he focused on meticulously describing the manufacture and use of Aboriginal tools, weapons, utensils and other items of material culture, a focus that now lends special significance to the huge volume of ethnographic material he collected. This paper offers a window onto one of the most important collections of rainforest artefacts and elucidates the frequently-fraught character of transactions between collectors, Aboriginal people and the state.

In the next paper, Rosita Henry traces the transformations of a particular type of anthropomorphic fire-maker found in a part of the North Queensland rainforest, and the transactions in these objects over more than a century. Most recently, these fire-makers have inspired the production of colourful sculptures, known as *bagu* and *jiman*, by artists from the Girringun Aboriginal Corporation in the heart of the North Queensland rainforest country. Henry's interest lies in the movement of these fire-makers from their original context of manufacture and use to their production for the global art market. She describes how the functional and the cosmological were entangled for the makers and users of these tools in the past, when the power of ancestral beings had to be harnessed for the business of making fire, perhaps made more difficult in the wet environment of tropical rainforest. Henry highlights the transformations between ancestral beings and material objects in the stories that are associated with the fire-makers, and the ways in which they were associated with specific places. She delves into a little-known ethnographic collection (that includes fire-makers) made by John Archibald Boyd during his residence on the Ripple Creek sugarcane plantation in the 1880s. Tracing the passage of these fire-makers over the past 120 years or so, from North Queensland to the south coast of New South Wales and finally to the

north shore in Sydney, Henry shows how the many transactions in these objects have culminated in their contemporary manifestation in the form of sculptures created by the Girringun artists.

The paper by anthropologist Mike Wood explores how Dudley Bulmer, an Aboriginal man originally from Cape York Peninsula, inscribed his life story into a range of artefacts, art works and performances collected and recorded by the anthropologist Norman Tindale. By the time Tindale met him in 1938, Bulmer was living at Yarrabah near Cairns, having worked in various capacities around North Queensland. His artworks and artefacts record his travels over the land, at the same time recording the parallels between his movements and those of ancestral beings. Some of Bulmer's artefacts seem entirely secular in purpose, a point Wood exemplifies by scrutinising a 'message stick' he made. But regardless of how prominently the Dreaming appears in his productions, Bulmer's artefacts and artworks were (and are) interpersonal and intergenerational transactions in his own sense of self as an Aboriginal man away from his home country and under the power of the state. Extending this line of argument, Wood links Bulmer's artefactual and artistic self-revelations to the autobiographical genre of Aboriginal writing that emerged some decades later.

Dresden-based museum anthropologist Corinna Erckenbrecht examines the transactions over time of a large body of ethnographic artefacts originally collected in the North Queensland rainforests by the German anthropologist Hermann Klaatsch at the beginning of the twentieth century and now housed in several museums in Germany and Poland. She recounts how and why Klaatsch turned from his initial interest in reconstructing the physical evolution of the human species to focus instead on collecting the material culture of Aboriginal people. She then traces the trajectory of the objects he collected, the inscriptions by which he asserted his ownership of these objects, and the ever-ramifying layers of inscription which were added as the objects moved between museums in Germany. Not only did the artefacts move; the

borders of European countries moved too, resulting in the ownership of one large collection of Klaatsch's artefacts being transferred to Poland. Deftly weaving her narrative about the artefacts into the political and social history of Europe, Erckenbrecht illuminates the manifold transformations of the ethnographic objects through multiple changes and claims of ownership.

Trish Barnard's paper focuses on objects from a collection in the Queensland Museum that was donated by Glenn Cooke. The collection was made after 1980 and comprises mostly ceramic homeware and tourist souvenirs made by non-Indigenous artists since the 1930s but inspired by images of traditional Aboriginal art reproduced in ethnographic texts and museum catalogues. Some of the designs on these objects were based on motifs taken from artefacts collected in the rainforest areas of North Queensland. Barnard traces the transactional history of some of these motifs and how they were transformed in the process. She suggests that as many non-Indigenous Australians' knowledge of Aboriginal art (and people) was drawn from objects such as these, Cooke's collection provides an important vehicle for accessing the ways in which Aboriginal people were perceived and portrayed within this time frame. Barnard's theme is that the collection represents misappropriation of Aboriginal art and culture, and she draws on literature concerning Margaret Preston to advance her case. Of interest, Barnard identifies that some of those involved in producing the ceramics were eastern European migrants who settled in Australia in the 1950s. In such instances, the adoption of Aboriginal art could be seen as naïve attempts to incorporate designs that were truly 'Australian'.

Otto and Hardys paper concludes our collection by addressing the colonial legacy of artefact collection outlined in earlier chapters. It does so by aligning digitalisation of cultural heritage with current attempts to repatriate artefacts and heritage to the descendants of the original producers. Highlighting Hardy's work with the Gugu Badhun people of North Queensland, Otto and Hardy show how researchers working in various parts of Australia have helped create interactive digital databases for communities. These databases, and their associated protocols of

use and access, can ensure that the recording, storage and display of cultural heritage is under Aboriginal control. Otto and Hardy argue that digitalisation transforms artefacts by creating possibilities for culture heritage items to enter into new social relations and generate new forms of knowledge.

Taken together, the papers in this volume provide an ethnographically-based history of property interests and transactions in artefacts combined with an account of the transformations over time of the ways in which the producers of those artefacts have been understood. Our exploration of the manner in which museums, governments, artefact producers and collectors have asserted claims in artefacts, and attempted to regulate artefact transactions, offers an innovative means of analysing artefact collections from this region. Bringing together and scrutinising the activities of a suite of collectors generates fresh insights into the dynamics of property relations. In addition, documenting the activities of collectors in this region extends the knowledge available to Indigenous people about the history and current location of artefacts of heritage interest to them.

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