Title:

Artefacts and Collectors in the Tropics of North Queensland

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Abstract:

This paper outlines some of the ways early artefact collecting contributed to the definition of the Australian region now known and marketed as the 'World Heritage Wet Tropics'. We focus on the collecting activities of Hermann Klaatsch and the work of Norman Tindale, to explore some of the factors that contributed to the different claims they made about the capacity of certain artefacts to represent a region and its history. We argue that these understandings of region and the past, along with the now widely dispersed artefacts, maintain a lively, albeit transformed, presence in current debates about Aboriginal regional culture, linking assertions of rights to lost and stolen cultural property with notions of large scale environmental management within the 'Wet Tropics'.

A rainforest shield from North Queensland recently sold in Sydney for a record AU$84,000 (Sotheby's 2008). Other items sold were: a shield ($36,000), an engraved wooden bowl ($33,600), an undecorated bowl, a bark basket, two twine baskets and a portrait of an Aboriginal leader. They formed part of a collection made by pastoralist Robert Stewart and taken to Scotland during the late nineteenth century. Today they have inherent value as 'rainforest Aboriginal artefacts' based on their provenance, biography, rarity, condition and other, intangible, 'collectable' dimensions of meaning and aesthetics.

Collections that enter Aboriginal art auctions are typically defined by such qualities. In the recent Sotheby's catalogue, North Queensland historian Anne Allingham, brought the artefacts to life and built up their provenance by describing the collection of the artefacts and their subsequent display in Scotland in the late nineteenth century (Sothebys 2008). Such 'deep description' of the genealogy of objects enhances their symbolic and market values, whether in the hands of museums or private collectors.

Collectors who consigned objects at this auction included two Aboriginal people from the wet tropics. In one case, a well-provenanced rainforest shield, that had returned to its origin point after some 160 years, was placed back into the market by its current Aboriginal owner and sold for $12,000. The sale of the shield was further authenticated by reference to native title. The auction catalogue states:

> [He] has owned the shield for at least twenty years, and has decided to sell it in order to raise funds to build on his soon-to-be-returned native title lands. (Sotheby's 2008)

The second shield, owned by an Aboriginal woman may have been consigned in order to raise much needed funds for a community-run museum (Trish Barnard, Qld Museum, pers. comm. 2008). Even though this shield was passed in, we might consider this consignment as a 'sacrificial' object; that is, in order to preserve and house better examples of rainforest material culture, this shield was being sacrificed.

Both examples demonstrate a circuitry in their trajectories: significant cultural materials come 'home' regionally and culturally, into Aboriginal hands, to be put back into the commodity market. Such agency of Aboriginal people is nothing new (Willis in Peterson et al 2008; Moseley 1879: 361 cited in Peterson, Allen & Hanby 2008: 9-10). What is different now is that the Aboriginal commodification of the shields is occurring in the context of debates about repatriation of artefacts

to their Aboriginal owners. Furthermore, these actions unsettle our presumptions about the place of Indigenous people in the commodity chain.

This paper discusses artefact collecting in the Wet Tropics of North Queensland, focusing on how artefacts are defined by the transactions in which they participate. An examination of such transactions and associated markets, showing how they worked to define value and price, provides a means of understanding the creation of the regional context of these artefacts. This involves outlining how collectors developed categories of Australian artefacts and then differentiated these in terms of regional specificity.

The paper focuses on the work of the German collector, Hermann Klaatsch, and the Australian anthropologist, Norman Tindale, in the rainforests of North Queensland. We explore various factors, including the collectors' interpretive frameworks and market demands that contributed to the 'representativeness' of their collections, which in turn created particular understandings of this region. We then discuss some ways in which rainforest Aboriginal people are currently engaging with these artefacts and how this contributes to the definition of the region now known and marketed as the 'World Heritage Wet Tropics'. We argue that lively, regional worlds continue to be created through the work of collectors, curators, Aboriginal people and market forces. The now widely dispersed artefacts maintain a dynamic, albeit transformed, presence in current debates about Aboriginal 'rainforest' culture, including assertions of rights to lost and stolen cultural property and notions of environmental management within the 'Wet Tropics'.

The notion of 'region' suggests a world ordered by hierarchically nested territories that range from the global to the local (Amin 2004). A 'cultural region' assumes shared traits between the people themselves and constituent entities such as language groups, dialects and tribes. Indeed such entities can be presented as constitutive of the region itself. For instance, in relation to North Queensland, Hamlyn-Harris (1912) emphasised the existence of mummified bodies; others viewed artefacts such as very large axe heads, swords, rainforest shields and bicornual baskets as unique to the area. Klaatsch (1923) conceptualised Aboriginal Australians as representatives of a distinct stage of human evolution, while Tindale and Birdsell (1941) developed ideas of successive waves of distinct racial types, whose primary representatives remained regionally distinct. More recently, the Wet Tropics region has been typified as the home of 'Rainforest Aborigines' who are understood to exhibit specific traits such as techniques for processing endemic toxic plants and distinctive forms of fire management.

The relationship between people, artefacts and regionalisation of the Wet Tropics has moved from the production of 'regions' based on evolutionary science and ethnographic classifications, to the production of regions as ecological zones.
The term 'tropical rainforest' first appeared in the literature during the late 1890s (Shimper 1898), but was not widely used among the populace. The term 'scrub' was commonly used well into the 1960s among locals and continues to be used today.
Since the 1950s the area has increasingly been known as 'the wet forest' and 'the wet tropics' (Webb 1959, Sanderson 2005). There has been a shift towards the increasing salience of ecological knowledge in understanding the intricacies of the region.

Hermann Klaatsch

One of the early collectors in the region was the German physical anthropologist Hermann Klaatsch (1863-1916). He travelled to Australia in March 1904 to find evidence for prehistorian Otto Schoetensack's theory that the origin of humankind lay in Australia. Here we present Klaatsch as moving from a pan-Australian evolutionary understanding of artefacts to a position based increasingly on a comparative ethnography of regional differences.

While Klaatsch was initially interested in collecting osteological material**,** Palaeolithic stone tools and 'eoliths' (believed to be the earliest stone tools), he experienced great difficulty in procuring this material. Also, in September 1904, when travelling through the Gulf of Carpentaria, he was nearly killed by local Aboriginal people in Normanton over his determination to acquire skeletal remains. Klaatsch's frustration at not meeting his original goals, the need to finance his travels and the demand from German museums for artefacts, led him to focus on material culture. The museums did not give Klaatsch specific guidelines on *what* to collect. As a full-time collector of artefacts during his three months in the Wet Tropics (October 1904 - January 1905), he depended on finding buyers for the items he purchased at his own expense. Klaatsch collected numerous specimens of generic objects such as boomerangs and spears to satisfy a diverse clientele, which also meant he could negotiate good prices because he was not dependant on a single buyer.

His practice of collecting as many artefacts as possible was also informed by the assumption that Aboriginal people were doomed to extinction (McGregor 1997). The artefacts thus took on a special aura as the last 'authentic artefacts' of the 'last Aborigines'. Klaatsch, aiming at renown for his research in Australia, sometimes claimed he was the last person who could collect such artefacts since their creators would soon be extinct. While in Kuranda in December 1904, Klaatsch observed that few new artefacts were being produced and old ones were hard to find. He claimed in a letter to

Schoetensack '…they do not produce any new ones on-account of which my objects, especially from around Cairns, might be of great value as they represent the last of their kind.'[1]

Value for Klaatsch was determined by the authenticity of artefacts, defined in terms of the context of their production. In order to procure artefacts produced in a virtually pre-contact context, he made long excursions into the scrub on horseback or on foot, sometimes using a local guide, in order to find the camps of local Aboriginal people. For example, in the Bellenden Ker Range he remarked:

> These Blacks live in the most wretched conditions, shy like wild animals and intimidated. They have almost none of their old weapons and often it is repugnant for me to take their last shields and swords. [2]

Klaatsch was concerned to give a representative picture of Aboriginal material culture. He sometimes chose 'magnificent specimens for a museum'[3] such as model boats obtained from Cape Bedford mission[4], colourful rainforest shields, big wooden swords and a crown of cockatoo feathers that had been used in a corroboree at Babinda Creek. He was also interested in the contemporary production of artefacts made with modern materials like fence wire or porcelain. He collected these items as evidence for the current state of Aboriginal artefact production and the creative adaptability of Aboriginal people, but then theorised this as 'degeneration'.

However, Klaatsch's main goal as a collector was to provide an overview of the range of Aboriginal artefacts. His collection included dilly bags, coolamons, fishnets, digging sticks, armbands, necklaces and children's toys. His final collection of more than 2000 cultural artefacts from his 3-year journey around Australia contained numerous duplicates. The director of the Hamburg Museum, Georg Thilenius, noted the 'great monotony of material'[5], yet wrote to Klaatsch that the artefacts were '…hugely comprehensive and they will thus supply pretty well all the German museums with a good set.' Indeed, Klaatsch provided almost identical collections to several museums.[6]

It is unclear whether Klaatsch thought in terms of the 'Wet Tropics' as a distinctive region while actually there. He was amazed when he first encountered mummification, which was to become one

[1] Letter Nr. 17, p. 6, from Klaatsch to Schoetensack of 10 – 20 January 1905, Private archive of Hermann Klaatsch (PHK).
[2] Letter No. 18, p. 5, from Klaatsch to Schoetensack of 19 – 23 February 1905 from Maryborough, PHK.
[3] Letter No. 16, p. 6, from Klaatsch to Schoetensack from 17 December 1904. PHK.
[4] Made originally for Walter E. Roth.
[5] Letter from Thilenius to Foy of 7 January 1907, Historical Archive of the City of Cologne, Germany (HACC).
[6] Letter from Thilenius to Klaatsch, p. 2, of 17 November 1906, PHK.

of the ethnographic signatures of the region, and did all he could to obtain some specimens. He was well aware of Australia-wide differences in the physical appearances of Aboriginal people and their material culture, but this led him to consider whether Aboriginal people were a mix of several waves of migration and to reflect on human origins. Klaatsch argued against unscientific observations of outward physical appearance, advocating anatomical measurements and other scientific investigations. He claimed that the Australian Aborigines were one distinctive human race which had developed different physical and cultural variations over time and space. At the same time, he noted similarities between geographically distant groups such as the rainforest people of North Queensland and the Tasmanian Aborigines. He took photographs of Aboriginal people in the rainforest area because they seemed to him to 'look' Tasmanian.

While in the Wet Tropics Klaatsch compared artefacts he found with those he had collected in the Gulf of Carpentaria. He encountered different styles of artefacts in Western Australia and the Northern Territory. On his return to Germany, Klaatsch argued that the Cologne Museum exhibition should display all the artefacts from the different regions of Australia, which he had sent to three museums, in one space. Thus, it was only on his return to Germany that Klaatsch explicitly articulated a notion of "regions" in Aboriginal Australia, expressed through specific cultural objects.

Klaatsch argued for the creation of a single exhibition of a representative sample of items collected by him from all over Australia, because this would allow a comparison of the various styles and techniques.[7] Yet, his perception of material culture was influenced not only by space (region), but also by time (development). He was interested in the 'morphogenesis' of weapons, understood as a linear development of their form and function. He explained his view in a letter to Schoetensack by reference to the different forms of clubs:

> To me the most instructive is the stock of clubs - the variation of which truly allows an insight into the morphogenesis of this Australian weapon. I have large and small clubs, some with a thickened end, some straight some slightly curved, some cylindrical and others somewhat flattened…I consider this the prototype of all Australian weapons for hitting and throwing. It is most probable that the shield also evolved from this club when considering the narrow shield ('club shield') from New South Wales.[8]

[7] Klaatsch explicitly used this point in his argument with the new director of the Leipzig museum, Karl Weule, because Weule was not prepared to send the already received items to Cologne.
[8] Letter Nr. 25, p. 38, from Klaatsch to Schoetensack of 22 – 31 December 1905 from Java, PHK.

In Klaatsch's opinion swords, shields, boomerangs and sacred objects had developed out of clubs.[9] This theory was influenced by Graebner and Foy's diffusionist theory of culture history and shared with evolutionism an idea of progress and the '…classification of cultural areas or individual groups according to hierarchical scales' (Penny 2003: 112). These ideas were expressed in the spatial organization of exhibits in the Cologne museum. Artefacts from Australia were displayed downstairs or at entrance level, whereas artefacts from 'higher' cultures were displayed on the first floor, and even 'higher' ones on the second floor (Penny 2003: 113-114).

Klaatsch hoped there would be a systematic study of each artefact type he had collected. He elaborated on this plan in a letter to the Director of the Cologne Museum:

> The plan which I imagine is a distribution of chapters to diverse gentlemen, of which one would have to describe all about the spears, another about the boomerangs, and another about the woven baskets, etc etc. Since my material originates from four totally different areas it represents a good basis for a comparison between them and with those stored in Germany already. Only by way of this comparison will a systematic study of the Australian ethnography be achieved.[10]

But Foy, the Director of the Museum, thought this was 'very impractical'[11], adding that he did not want a catalogue-like description, but an 'historical-analytical' treatment of the artefacts.

Klaatsch wanted to show just a selection of the artefacts he had collected:

> I consider a good selection of Australian things as absolutely necessary. Considering the relatively small number of diverse utilitarian commodities it is obvious that I collected a large number of some of the same things. It is only important to sort this material in order to produce an exhibition as instructive as possible. [12]

However, Foy apparently displayed every item without exception. The actual display took place from September to October 1907 and involved more than 2000 artefacts that had been collected from all over Australia. One section showed artefacts from Queensland, another had weapons from the Northern Territory, the third had artefacts from the Kimberley and the last contained the few artefacts Klaatsch had collected in southern Australia. Each area had separate showcases that were neatly set apart giving a clear idea of the different and quite separate regions. Within the showcases, types of artefacts were grouped together: spears in one group, boomerangs in another and so on. The way the artefacts were displayed allowed an overview of the different regions, facilitating a

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[9] See letter Nr. 25, p. 41f. from Klaatsch to Schoetensack of 22 – 31 December 1905 from Java, PHK.
[10] Letter Nr. 3, p. 9f, from Klaatsch to Foy of 15 November 1906 on board the S. S. Airlie from Port Darwin to Sydney, HACC.
[11] Handwritten comment by Foy in Klaatsch's letter Nr. 3, p. 9f, from Klaatsch to Foy of 15 November 1906 on board the S. S. Airlie from Port Darwin to Sydney, HACC.
[12] Letter Nr. 3. p. 7, from Klaatsch to Foy of 15 November 1906 on board the S. S. Airlie from Port Darwin to Sydney, HACC.

visual comparison of the variations across different parts of Australia. In his guidebook of the Cologne museum, Foy (1909:10) praised this exhibition as a good example of how a well prepared ethnological exhibition should be presented to the public.

The exhibition was a compromise between Foy's and Klaatsch's approaches. Foy's interest in culture history was to locate Australian Aborigines temporally by virtue of their artefact types, while Klaatsch rejected such contextualization in favour of regional artefact typologies. Nevertheless, Foy's way of displaying the collection also served Klaatsch's interest in systemically investigating and understanding regional differences in the material culture of Australian Aborigines.

Thus, while Klaatsch's initial interest in Australia was informed by his theoretical interest in human evolution, in the context of his actual *practices* of collection, he came to recognise regional differences. He then sought to display and further document such differences via the development of the Cologne exhibition and museum based research processes. The notion of 'region' that emerged in reference to the artefacts Klaatsch collected in Australia was a function not only of his collecting practices and increasing ethnographic knowledge, but also an outcome of his interaction with museum staff.

Norman Tindale

The contribution of museums to the creation of artefacts as emblems of regions intensified as museum staff themselves became artefact collectors. This shift to museums undertaking their own artefact collection is exemplified in the career of Norman Tindale. As well as writing one the great texts in Australian anthropology (1974), Tindale was a pioneer Australian archaeologist. He was trained in geology and biology and completed a Bachelor's degree in Science at the University of Adelaide in 1933. Tindale's first passion was entomology and the fieldwork methods of natural science, forging an international reputation during his lifetime for his work on the *Hepialidae* moths. After being appointed assistant entomologist at the South Australian Museum in 1918, Tindale embarked on his first major field trip during which he sketched the tribal Aboriginal boundaries in the Groote Eylandt and Roper River areas of the Northern Territory. His map was edited before the report was published and the boundaries removed on the grounds that Australian Aboriginal people were wanderers with no fixed attachments to land (SA Museum 2008). Tindale's reaction was to dedicate his research efforts for the next two decades towards proving that Aboriginal groups did relate territorially to distinct regions that could be successfully mapped.

Tindale's work on this project represents an attempt to understand and map various Aboriginal boundaries especially at the 'tribal' level. He was interested in understanding these boundaries and Aboriginal life in general as being crucially influenced by the Australian environment. Analysing the 'individual ecological settings' and 'ecological controls' operating on Australian tribes, he argued there was often a correlation between tribal limits and 'ecological and geographical boundaries' (Tindale 1974: 55-56). However, these boundaries could be diverse, Tindale observing that 'divides, mountain ranges, rivers, general ecological and plant associational boundaries, microclimate zone limits, straits and peninsulas often furnish clear-cut and stable boundaries' (1974: 56).

Norman Tindale came to the Wet Tropics with objectives other than ethnographic collecting. On behalf of the South Australian Museum he briefly visited Townsville and Cairns en route to Groote Eylandt in 1921[13]. In 1927 (or December 1926) he visited Cairns and Kuranda on his way to Cape York Peninsula[14]. These visits were brief, but in the second of them he had some contact with rainforest Aborigines at Mona Mona mission near Kuranda. Interaction with rainforest Aboriginal people was more extensive in 1938-1939 during the Harvard and Adelaide Universities Anthropological Expedition conducted by Tindale and American physical anthropologist, Joseph Birdsell.

The purpose of this expedition was the study of racial intermixture, a topic then of great concern to administrators of Aboriginal Affairs. Professor E.A. Hooton of Harvard University explained:

> The joint enterprise of the University of Adelaide and the Division of Anthropology of Harvard University has for its objective the study of crosses between native Australians and Whites and other mixtures, including the Tasmanian remnants. Its further purpose is to secure, with respect to these crosses, as complete genealogical, ethnological and sociological information as possible. It is noted that attention should be paid also to the acquisition of information pertaining to psychology and intelligence.... It is agreed that there should be stressed the capacity of the hybrids for adapting themselves to European civilization, since this group of the population constitutes a government problem…[15]

Tindale and Birdsell devoted the greater part of their time on the expedition to fulfilling these aims and true to Hooton's preliminary advice, they stressed 'the capacity of hybrids for adapting themselves to European civilization'. However, they had a good deal of time to devote to broader anthropological activities, including some artefact collecting. They also mention recording on film the manufacture of baskets and tree-climbing techniques (Tindale and Birdsell 1941: 7-8).

[13] SAM, Tindale Collection AA 338/1/1/1.
[14] SAM, Tindale Collection AA 338/1/4.
[15] E.A. Hooton, 5 May 1938, J.B. Cleland Papers, UAA, box 3, folder 6.

Moreover, Tindale took many photographs not only of artefacts but also of their manufacture. While earlier collectors had taken photographs Tindale was perhaps the first in the Wet Tropics to exploit photographic technology to such an extent. We have here the emergence of a significant practice of collecting images of artefacts, supplementing and even partially replacing the collection of the artefacts themselves.

In the course of their research in North Queensland, Tindale and Birdsell distinguished a new Aboriginal 'racial' type. Tindale reported his first impressions to Professor J.B. Cleland in October 1938:

> We have found a strange people to be the inhabitants of the rain scrub areas around Cairns. They have special languages and customs which separate them from all other Australians both in their full-blood form and in the F1 cross where the differences are clear cut. Birdsell and I are drafting a preliminary announcement about this which we will submit to yourself and to Prof Hooton as soon as we have it completed[16].

These people, Tindale reported, were much smaller in stature than other Aborigines, and Birdsell found that they differed from other mainland Aboriginal groups in hair type, skin colour and blood group[17]. Tindale and Birdsell postulated that they were the residue of an initial wave of Aboriginal occupants of the continent, now confined as a 'refugee group'[18] in their inhospitable rainforest environment, while another 'refugee' population of similar type was confined to Tasmania. They argued that other examples of this type could be found 'in small hideaway groups in the rainforests of tropical Southeast Asia and New Guinea, and as far out in to the Pacific as the New Hebrides (Tindale 1974: 89). According to Tindale and Birdsell, unlike all other Australian Aborigines, the rainforest and the Tasmanian groups were Negritic people.

In 1941 Tindale and Birdsell published an article entitled 'Tasmanoid Tribes in North Queensland' in which they set out their findings about this group in greater detail. Here, they advanced their tri-hybrid theory of Aboriginal origins, the 'three discrete ethnic elements' tentatively labelled 'Southern', 'Northern' and 'Tasmanoid'(Tindale and Birdsell, 1941: 1). This was explicitly set against the anthropological orthodoxy of the day, according to which Aborigines were an exceptionally homogenous race. Tindale and Birdsell's three waves of invaders later received greater fame as the Murrayian, Carpentarian and Barrinean races (Coon et al 1950: 115-27; Tindale 1974: 89-93).

[16] Tindale to Cleland, 23 October 1938, J.B. Cleland papers, UAA, box 1, folder 1.
[17] Birdsell, Field Impressions, 24 July 1939, J.B. Cleland Collection. SAMAA.
[18] Birdsell, Field Impressions.

In their 1941 article, Tindale and Birdsell named twelve tribes (Ngatjan, Mamu, Wanjuru, Tjapukai, Barbaram, Idindji, Kongkandji, Buluwai, Djiru, Djirubal, Gulngai and Keramai) deemed to be most representative of the Tasmanoid type, though conceding that all were mixed to some degree with other types (especially Southern, that is, Murrayian). Members of these twelve tribes diverged from other mainland Aborigines in stature, body weight, hair type, nasal structure, teeth and blood group (Tindale and Birdsell 1941: 5). Tindale and Birdsell (1941: 6) referred to 'partial mummification' of dead bodies as a cultural trait of this group as well as noting that 'food cannibalism was rife'.

Later Tindale argued that the Barrineans were made up of 'small tribes' (such as the Mamu, Babaram, Idindji, Tjapukai and others). He called for the recognition of the 'small tribe' as a specific sub-type of the 'tribe', defining it as a social entity that occupied a relatively diminutive territory and was rather sedentary in character[19]. He argued that the Barrinean groups had been 'small tribes' for a long time.

> because of their varied economic bases for living – namely the almost year-long rains and the constant supplies of food of a vegetable nature, much of it derived by recourse to the tops of the rainforest canopy by climbing with looped canes – they are limited to very small intensely used areas rather than the true hunter's wider range in search of game. From this it would appear that any food cycle that can be developed in a limited area will hold a small tribe together. (Tindale 1974: 113)

Under 'material culture' Tindale and Birdsell (1941:7-8) referred to 'large decorated fighting shields', 'long, wooden, fighting swords', 'beaten bark blankets' and distinctive cane and grass baskets. They noted that several 'highly characteristic forms are made; the designs of these are confined to the inner groups of Tasmanoid folk so that their association with them may be rather old ...the Barbaram, Tjapukai and Idindji make half-hitch coiled grass baskets closely similar in their appearance and technique of manufacture to those of the Tasmanian' (Tindale & Birdsell 1941: 7-8).

In addition they highlighted 'specialised techniques of food gathering as characteristically developing in a dense rain-forest environment. The main foods were roots, seed, fruits and honey with meat being scarce. They noted 'many of the seeds and nuts eaten contain actively poisonous alkaloids, which are eliminated only by special washings, leachings, roastings and by fermentation methods'. Stone tools were seen to support this specialisation on nuts and seeds and they described how 'large slabs containing circular pits of approximately 2.5 cm diameter are used in the breaking of the exceedingly hard Queensland Nut, which yields an important food item'(1941:8).

[19] Tindale (1974:123) was aware of divisions among these small tribes and documented the role of toponyms in creating such internal differences.

Even though some of the food processing techniques they outlined involved species endemic to the Wet Tropics, Tindale and Birdsell did not emphasize these potential environmental influences in reference to most of the artefact and cultural practices they listed. This was partly because, as they themselves noted, some elements on their list, such as the painted bark shields were not actually unique to the rainforest region.

Further, Tindale and Birdsell were not entirely certain how to attribute agency to nature or environment. For instance, they were not always sure how to characterise the environment of these Barrinean Tasmanoid small tribes. At one point they were reluctant to define the environment as 'true rainforest'. The proliferation of descriptors in the quote below – 'tropical jungle', 'savannah forests', 'rain jungle', 'shelter jungle' and 'not rainforests' – indicates something of the complexity and the ambiguity of the kinds of environmental features with which they were dealing.

> Much of the area occupied by the Queensland Tasmanoids is noted for its high, and relatively uniform, rainfall and a great deal of it is covered in dense tropical jungle, interspersed with belts of Savannah forest in which species of Eucalyptus dominate. The rain jungles, more correctly, shelter jungles, are locally known as "scrubs" and occasionally as "brushes". Strictly speaking they are not rain forests. Tall trees, of which some of the dominant members are *Agathis, Ficus, Flindersia* and *Podocarpus*, form a high canopy of foliage, shutting sunlight from the vine and palm-stem entangled floor of the jungle. (Tindale and Birdsell 1941: 4)

Later Tindale (1959, 1974) further qualified any simple understanding of regional environmental constraint and control on the Barrineans' unique cultural artefacts in his account of the use of fire by people living in the rainforest. He portrayed them as 'living in artificially created open patches cleared in past times by firing of the forest during the dry phases of the year' (1974: 89). In arguing that Aborigines had used fire to change their environment, Tindale moved beyond the view that nature operated as an independent variable that constrained or determined the possibilities of Aboriginal sociality. Instead he offered a more nuanced view where nature is itself partially transformed by human intervention. Ecology then was to be understood as an outcome of human–environment interactions that we might now term 'bio-cultural'. Developing the idea that elements of nature were influenced by humans, Tindale argued that people's use of fire 'probably has had a significant hand in the moulding of the present configuration of parts of Australia' and that 'some of the post climax rain forests may have been destroyed in favour of invading sclerophyll, as the effects of firestick were added to the effects of changing climate in Early Recent time' (1959: 42).

Tindale used his experience of working in the Atherton Tableland to support this argument:

> In the rainforests of the Atherton Plateau there are often to be met…enclaves of grassland as well as curious patches of wet sclerophyll forest. According to the views of the negrito aborigines as expressed to me in 1938, such areas arise from their occasionally successful practice of setting fire to rain-forest patches during the dry spells which periodically occur and cause the usually wet forest floor to become a giant tinder box. Since burning of the rain forest 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 may have been very great. (1959: 43)[20]

Tindale rejected the view that Australia had existed in a zoological and botanical equilibrium in which climate rather than humans was the sole arbiter (1959: 191). He wanted to present the Aboriginal Australian as an 'ecological agent' in the history of Australia.

However, the fundamental feature of Tindale and Birdsell's definition of the rainforest Aborigines was as a distinctive physical type, bearing distinctive cultural traits and possessing a unique material culture. No earlier scientist seems to have defined the group with this degree of distinctiveness, across such a range of attributes. That is, the rainforest Aborigines were given an existence as a discrete group to a greater extent than hitherto.

Tindale's and Birdsell's typification of the Wet Tropics region in terms of the physical characteristics of the inhabitants has not exerted much influence on recent thinking about the region. Rather, it is their definition of rainforest Aborigines as exercising a particular kind of environmental agency that now informs many influential understandings of Aboriginal people as environmental co-managers of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area. Paralleling this shift towards regarding Indigenous people as potential managers of their own cultural landscape, Aboriginal people were also transformed from subjects of state regulation to holders of Native Title, determined through membership of language groups, tribes and clans. In addition regional representative bodies such as the earlier Rainforest Action Network and the Aboriginal Rainforest Council were established. This change in governance is also linked to new forms of property rights in cultural heritage, including the right to place cultural materials in the commodity market.

Indigenous Engagement with the Collectors, Collections and Regionalism

Since the 1980s, rainforest Aboriginal people have increasingly engaged with artefact collections as part of a more general movement to secure control and ownership of movable cultural property held in Australia and elsewhere. In addition, they actively participate in a vibrant exchange of cultural

[20] While others have cautiously attributed more to 'wildfire' than human-lit fires (Webb 1968), some scholars have questioned the extent of any human-derived transformation of the rainforest (Horton 1991). Our interest here is in outlining Tindale's understanding of a region in terms of ecology or nature.

artefacts and performances to create their own relational identities as different local groups within the regional category, 'rainforest people'. At issue is their own sense of 'translocal regionalism' and their improvisations on the kinds of boundaries that create relevant local and regional distinctions.

Artefacts, collected and defined by European collectors, today play an active role in identity politics. For example, in 1982 Djabugay from Kuranda set up a museum display in a small shop-front. In 1990 several young people from the community attended a Museum Studies course. They wanted to transform the museum from a static display 'into a cultural resource centre focussing on the revitalisation of Djabugay cultural heritage' (Duffin et al 1992: 1). As part of their study program the students visited the Australian Museum in Sydney, the South Australian Museum, the Queensland Museum, and the John Oxley Library in Brisbane. They were able to access and collect copies of family history records and photographs, and to document Djabugay objects held by these institutions. Importantly, they secured the return of copies from the South Australian Museum of many of the genealogies originally collected by Tindale during his field trip to Mona Mona Mission in 1938. In addition, the Queensland Museum agreed to lend rainforest objects in its possession and these, supplemented by objects lent by the James Cook University Anthropology Museum, were used to refresh their original Kuranda display. The objects lent by JCU included two bicornual baskets, an eel trap, a grass basket, a bullroarer, two boomerangs, and a firestick set. These were from a collection of objects, made in the 1960s for sale by a neighbouring group of rainforest peoples – Djirbal from the Murray Upper area - on the encouragement of a local non-Indigenous farmer/pastoralist in the area. The collection was purchased by the Aboriginal Arts Board and subsequently donated to the University (May Abernethy, Museum Curator, pers comm.; Henry 2003).

Reconceptualised as a 'cultural resource centre', the Kuranda museum became a means to trace family histories and pre-contact place affiliations. Henry (2003: 76) argues 'the objects in the museum display held little value in and of themselves'. Their value lay in their usefulness as a resource for tracing connections to people and place. The displayed artefacts also functioned as mnemonic devices by which elders could reveal/release embodied knowledge of the techniques used for their manufacture and the practices with which they were associated (Henry 2003: 76). Workshops were held in which elders demonstrated and taught such skills as basket weaving, spear manufacture and shield making. In this manner Aboriginal people engaged in a process of re-appropriation and transformation of the meaning of these museum objects by re-qualifying them, imbuing them with their own values.

Yirrganydji elder, George Skeene recently outlined his experience in seeking knowledge of artefacts collected from the Cairns region. Since 1992 he has been researching his family and life in the camps and reserves around Cairns to document the history of the Yirrganydji people[21] (Skeene 2008: 9). Skeene became especially interested in artefacts held by German museums. In 1992 he became aware of the collecting activities of Hermann Klaatsch in Cairns, and in 1995 Sabine Plag told him that some of these artefacts were held in the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum at Cologne. Skeene later visited the museum and found records of artefacts collected from where his ancestors had lived. While at the Museum he was

> …given a small cardboard container, which held many index cards…I worked through the index cards. All of a sudden I came across what I was looking for. There, in front of me, was an index card from Dr. Klaatsch's Cairns expedition, which said, in German, *Necklace with long pieces of Nautilus Shell from Lower Barron River near Cairns*. After many years of research, and half a world away, I had found what I was looking for. I was very happy. (Skeene 2008: 238)

In his text Skeene gives salience to a form of knowledge and spatial proximity that overcomes his prior separation from this component of his culture. This knowledge and associated objects provide him with a narrative – a pathway to and from the past and a way of asserting his own identity as a scholar, as Yirrganydji, and as a Cairns identity. Through his knowledge of these objects he is able to engage in certain transactions, social exchanges and create a relational field that connects him to others, but also redefines himself in reference to his own place and culture, not least as an author (Skeene 2008). This process of collapsing temporal-spatial distance between people and objects, and of articulating new relationships based on knowledge (Bolton 2004), was also evidenced in the development of the Museum in Kuranda. Just as George Skeene has been negotiating for Yirrganydji artefacts to be returned to Cairns on long term loan, the Djabugay were revitalised by bringing collected objects into their domain.

Another recent strategy has been the promotion of Intellectual Property law as a way of maintaining and reasserting control over an often fragmented cultural heritage. These moves are linked to understandings of artefacts as 'cultural resources' as when Henrietta Fourmile (1989: 3) argues that 'important and original collections of my cultural resources, resources of the Kunggandji and Yidinyji people of the rainforest region around Cairns, are located in Adelaide, Melbourne, Canberra, Sydney and Brisbane'. In such accounts of artefacts and culture, both can emerge as a fragmented regional resource currently subject to limited property rights and as having a potentially redemptive unity. The current dispersal of artefacts is seen to harm Rainforest Aboriginal people

[21] The Yirrganydji have found it difficult to get adequate recognition of their native title claims from the official structures that regulate and endorse such claims.

culturally, socially and politically because such artefacts are crucial to local 'lifeworlds of meaning' (Coombe cited in Brown 2005: 49). These kinds of claim have from time to time been placed in a framework asserting the existence of Indigenous intellectual property rights in which Indigenous 'cultural heritage' is to be understood as an inherent right:

> The intellectual property rights of the Indigenous Nations and Peoples of their territories in the wet tropical forest areas have traditionally included the recognition of a cultural heritage inherent in their interdependent relationship with the natural environment, and that such cultural heritage remains an integral part of the Indigenous Peoples perception of their inherent rights in relation to their territories in the Wet Tropics Region. (Julayinbul Statement 1993)

These intellectual property claims have combined with identity-based land claims and claims to a crucial Aboriginal role in environmental co-management to form a broader political field of state recognition of indigeneity. As Weiss (2007: 419) argues, recent talk of 'cultural resources' and 'cultural heritage' within the dynamics of this kind of recognition politics authorises only limited possibilities for identity claims. Artefacts are increasingly linked to an apparently progressive historical narrative of nation building through adequate recognition. But recognition of property relationships only emerges if Indigenous people can demonstrate state authorised forms of continuity with their past, traditions, customs and law.

Yet, as the Kuranda case reveals, alongside these more formal processes of legal recognition of property rights, Aboriginal people are actively engaged in knowledge transfer transactions among themselves that involve different concepts of cultural 'property' and a person's, or group's, rights and responsibilities with regard to such transactions. In other words, concepts of 'repatriation', 'retrieval' and/or 're-appropriation' do not only speak to the relationship between the Aboriginal domain and appropriative white colonists. They are also about a lively engagement of people in regional Aboriginal rainforest networks of exchange in 'cultural knowledge'. For example, an Aboriginal women's dance group based in Townsville always acknowledges that they have been given special permission to perform the dances by named elders of the Kuku Yalandji tribal group, to whom some members of the dance group are related. They dance to songs sung in the Kuku Yalandji language and recorded by Kuku Yalandji elders for the specific use of the group.

Similarly, among Djabugay people, members of a younger generation, whose own parents and grandparents no longer know how to weave, have sought knowledge and skills of basket weaving from an elder of a neighbouring group. Thus, both objects and knowledge are transacted and both are highly valued. What we find in operation today is a regional system of knowledge transaction and transmission conducted in line with particular concepts of Intellectual Property and Indigenous 'copyright'. Where it is felt that the particular skills to create certain cultural objects have been lost

to a younger generation, in the sense that there are no elders remaining who can pass on that knowledge, younger people have turned to elders in neighbouring rainforest groups to teach them and give them permission to perform and enact such creative endeavours. It is here also that iconic objects deposited in museums by European collectors, such as the bicornual baskets, become useful. Their value lies in the secret of their construction. A weaver who today specialises in bicornual baskets which he produces as fine art objects, noted that he learned his skills not only by watching his grandmother, but also by examining closely the bicornual baskets that had been 'repatriated' to his community museum. Objects collected in the past are seen to hold the knowledge of their construction, which is revealed to the descendants of their creators.

Just as the collecting practices of scientists such as Klaatsch and Tindale contributed to the definition of regional identities, so also it is in the *practice* of their re-appropriation and use of cultural objects that Aboriginal people today contribute to the on-going constitution and articulation of multiple categories of identification, including those along regional dimensions.

Conclusion

We have indicated some ways that artefacts have been contextualised in a variety of understandings of the Wet Tropics region. This regional emphasis differs from existing 'biographical' approaches to artefacts where the primary interest is on an individual collector and/or the artefacts collected by that individual (e.g. McDougall and Davidson 2008). Our focus on the social processes generating the definition and reproduction of specific regional understandings allows for a broader historical understanding of the collected artefacts than that provided by the biographical approach. We have approached artefacts in terms of the different kinds of transactions and property claims in which they are entangled.

Artefact collections emerge as dense conjunctures of social networks, power and significance involving both creative and destructive transformations of a number of social worlds (see also Thomas 1991). While artefacts may or may not be associated with political struggle, they inevitably involve the creation of new knowledge, new links to the past and future and new relationships. They are actively involved in the reiteration, revaluation and transformation, of older definitions of region – such as those outlined by people like Klaatsch, Tindale and others when they initially collected and created 'artefacts' imbued with regional significance.

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