

The Archaeological Heritage of Christianity in Northern Cape York Peninsula

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Abstract

For those who have worked in northern Cape York Peninsula and the Torres Strait, the term 'coming of the light' will have instant meaning as the symbolic reference to the advent of Christianity amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

This paper explores the approaches that anthropologists and archaeologists have adopted in exploring the issues around Christianity, Aboriginal people, missions and cultural transformations. For the most part these disciplines have pursued divergent interests and methodologies which I would suggest have resulted in limited understandings of the nature and form of contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity and a lack of appreciation of the material culture that evidences this transformation.

Through an overview of some of the work undertaken in the region the paper explores the question 'Can we really understand contemporary identity and the processes that have led to its development without fully understanding the complex connections between place and people and historical events and symbolic meaning, in fact the 'social landscape of Aboriginal and Islander Christianity.'

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KEYWORDS: Archaeology, Christian Missions, Cape York Peninsula

Introduction

In this paper I consider the overlap between anthropological enquiry and archaeology in relation to the Christian Mission period in the history of Cape York Peninsula. These mission sites and their physical evidence seem to have fallen between the cracks of archaeological and anthropological investigation. This paper is intended as a provocative re-consideration of the historical and archaeological place-based work in relation to the mission period undertaken as part of my research in Northern Cape York (McIntyre-Tamwoy 2002).

In 2003 when an earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Australian Anthropological Society Conference I was able to say that 'the mission period in Cape York Peninsula has until recently largely been ignored by archaeologists'. This remains generally true although elsewhere in Australia there have been isolated significant studies (Birmingham 1992, Lydon 2009, Brown et al 2004). Generally 'mission archaeology' is much more actively explored in the USA (see for example Graham 1998 for an overview of archaeological studies of mission sites in the Americas). The relative lack of attention in Australia to missions as archaeological sites is probably due to a number of reasons:

- Firstly, until recently the recent past has not been a major focus of archaeological investigation in this area, nor in many other parts of Australia.
- Secondly, many archaeologists employed in what remains in Australia an essentially non-indigenous

dominated profession, are squeamish about the impact of western religions on indigenous culture.

- Thirdly, given that historical archaeology in Australia has been heavily reliant on the investigation of built structures (Paterson & Wilson 2000:85) the nature of the archaeological evidence itself means that it is less likely to be a focus of investigation. In Cape York Peninsula many of the structures relating to this period have been actively destroyed as a deliberate government strategy of 'erasure'.

It is this third point that I will focus on in this paper. In most situations the archaeological record comprises the more durable artefacts and material culture of societies. Even in the contact and post contact periods when historical sources are drawn on to provide detail and context, the archaeologist seeks the material evidence to illustrate, corroborate or reveal the story. It is the stone, glass ceramic and structures that survive to tell that story- they 'speak' to the archaeologist. These items and their stratigraphic context are interpreted to draw conclusions about 'normal societal activities i.e. 'continuity' and 'cataclysmic events that lead to cultural change.

In contrast, the archaeology of Christianity or the mission period in Northern Cape York Peninsula is generally comprised of ephemeral and fragile remains. This is partly an outcome of the usual forces of nature (such as cyclones, rain, termites) but also of government and church policies. Government policies and practices once favoured and encouraged the establishment of



Figure 1: Mission Church at Aurukun c.1990. The steeple is from the old church at Mapoon Mission and was removed to Aurukun when the mission at Mapoon was destroyed.

missions but later actively demolished many of them. Both actions were about forced movement and control of people. Erasing all physical evidence of an abandoned mission or settlement was a way of ensuring that people would not try to re settle it. Disturbing or taking control of places which were once the focus of traditional activity was a strategy for disrupting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life at the outset of the mission period and then also for facilitating the dismantling of Aboriginal attachment to the missions themselves e.g Mapoon Mission.

While anthropologists have considered the mission period and its legacy in most of the major anthropological studies undertaken in the region (Chase, 1980; 1988; Martin 1993; Trigger 1985), they rarely if at all consider the strong attachment that exists to the physical evidence of this aspect of history. The interest of anthropologists reflects the importance of Christianity to contemporary Aboriginal identity in CYP and the anthropological engagement here and elsewhere in Australia (Swain and Bird Rose 1988) with the creativity of indigenous peoples in adapting and transforming Christian doctrine and practice to make it uniquely their own. In many cases missionaries and mission practices have been presented by anthropologists (Chase 1988) as an historical backdrop to contemporary communities as a way of explaining their evolution and as one of the roots of contemporary social problems in these communities.

Anthropologists elsewhere have taken this area of research further to explore the relationships between individual aspects of Christian practice such as the introduction of specific modes of dress, and the development of unique emergent 'traditions' as in Comaroff's consideration of indigenous meaning attached to the adoption and retention of introduced clothing styles amongst the Tswana of Africa (Comaroff 1996).

Generally anthropological studies in Cape York Peninsula stop short of exploring the importance of the physical fabric and form of the buildings and structures to Aboriginal identity.

The Coming of the Light

Christianity came late to the people of Cape York. In fact missionary forays were made into the frontiers of New Guinea from Somerset Cape York, before they were made into this mainland wilderness. Torres Strait Islanders were the first people in the area to be converted and intrepid islanders were trained as missionaries to accompany the London Missionary Society (LMS) into the 'heathen wilds of New Guinea'. For some time then Christian Torres Strait Islanders were

uncomfortably positioned in between the magics of *Daudai* (Papua New Guinea) and *Kie Daudai* or *Mainlan* (Australia) but largely stripped of their own (pre Christian) power. This fear can still be evidenced in some interactions today. In fact the "Coming of the Light" or 'Zulai One' is a prevailing Christian festival through-out the Torres Strait and the northern-most part of mainland Australia. In some places the coming of the light monument is the only physical testament remaining to this period of colonisation. The term 'coming of the light' comes from the bible.

..the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned' (Mathew 4,16)

The LMS established training schools in the Torres Strait and trained black missionaries to go out and spread the word. No doubt this in part explains the melding of Christian and traditional practice which is so evident on the islands today. The islands themselves no doubt conveyed to the missionaries a sense of confinement which although an illusion, saved people from the level of interference that mainland people were subjected to.



Figure 2: Interior of the Mission Church at Aurukun c1990. At this time the church had been recently renovated and a number of hand painted church artworks had been discarded and were lying outside the building.

On the mainland however Christian missionaries followed a pattern established elsewhere in Australia, of 'calling people in' to mission stations. This also occurred to a limited extent on those islands belonging to the Kaurereg which are closest to the mainland where there had been and continues to be continuous movement from mainland to island to mainland.

The Archaeological Evidence

Since this mission period continued up until the early 1960's one would expect that there would be substantial evidence of it in terms of buildings and other material culture. However this is not the case except on Hammond Island where the church was built of stone (see Figures 3 and 4). Queensland's dark history of forced removals and government control has meant that places and structures have often been violently erased from the landscape to ensure that they did not provide sanctuary or opportunity for indigenous people to occupy areas no longer deemed suitable or convenient to the settler government. As the past practices of church and government in relation to indigenous Australians have become unfashionable, there has been a concerted attempt to remove physical evidence of the colonial missions and colonial settlements from the landscape as a way of ameliorating a collective settler shame. This destruction has often occurred in the face of indigenous people's objections, at least those people who most clearly have a right to determine the future of these places.



Figure 3: *The Sacred Heart Church on Kirriri (Hammond Island) 1991*



Figure 4: *The Mission house at Kirriri 1991*

A case in point is Mapoon Mission station. Many people probably already know the story of Mapoon as it is widely cited as one of the most extreme examples of the Queensland government's race relations (see Roberts 1975). Mapoon is situated on the western side of Port Musgrave on Cape York Peninsula. It was established on the 28th November, 1891 on behalf of the Presbyterian Church by Moravian Missionaries, the Rev. J.G Ward (1857- 1895) and Rev J. N. Hey (1862 -1951). It was eventually closed to facilitate bauxite exploration and mining although mining did not in fact proceed at the settlement location.

As was the case in many mission stations on Cape York Peninsula, the station operated several enterprises, the labour of course being provided by the converts. People had to not only had to settle on the mission and suffer interference in their personal lives (such as told who they could or could not marry or as is documented in church files go to court for alleged lewd thoughts or aspirations) they also had to buy their supplies from the mission. Gradually people at New Mapoon and other mission stations throughout the area became semi sedentary and dependent on a cash economy which was to some extent artificially maintained. Despite an often high degree of conformity to the rules of missionaries which were justified in terms of preparing Aboriginal people for entry into Anglo-Australian society at the end of the mission period Aboriginal people were not allowed to adopt the control over their destinies that had been promised. In the case of Mapoon, others were involved in discussions about access to and exploitation of natural resources which would disrupt lives and culture and disband families. In the lead up to the closure of the Mission momentous decisions were being made on their behalf which would cause almost as much social upheaval as the advent of Christianity itself. This extract from the Australian Board of Missions:

The current wave of exploitation of Australia's natural resources has now flowed into the Reserves on which our North Queensland Aborigines Stations have been built up. Fortunately it has been delayed long enough to permit the Church to go far through the years towards preparing the people for its impact.

The whole shoreline of our Reserves is subject to a prospecting licence for rutile and other mineral. Tremendous deposits of bauxite (aluminium yielding ore) have been discovered over a wide area of the Mapoon, Weipa and north Aurukun areas. Mining leases will be granted and a vast enterprise producing processed alumina for home consumption and export will soon be established.

This is a necessary national development and will include a large white township and deep sea port possibly near the site of the present Weipa Station. The Board of Missions and the Queensland State Aborigines and Foreign Missions Committee have had conference with the Government and Mining interests. Detailed schemes to safeguard and promote the full interests of the Aborigines under Mission nurture and guidance, are being worked out

for acceptance before the enabling legislation is dealt with by the Queensland Parliament.

Instead of an ordered incline toward the readiness for assimilation over another generation or two, our Aboriginal people are faced with a sudden ascent. They must make the grade or go under. The whole structure of their living and working will be affected – is already being affected. It offers one of the greatest challenges that has ever come to our Church and the eyes of Australia will be on our work.” (MLK2569.)

The aftermath of the missions, and the churches withdrawal were to have a lasting effect on the communities of the region. The truth was that Missions were becoming more costly to run. They no longer survived as self sufficient businesses in the changing economy since the Second World War. The churches were withdrawing and handing over the management of the people to the Queensland Government. In the case of Mapoon the government was faced with the temptation presented by the allure of mineral exploitation. In the face of such development potential the people were expendable. The idea had been to consolidate the local missions by disbanding the Mapoon Mission and moving people to Weipa where people could be managed more economically and benefit from the proposed development of the area but many of the people of Mapoon resisted suggestions to move. So in the end the government stepped in and moved the people farther away to ensure that they did not drift back to their homeland.

An old friend Stephen Mark (now deceased) told me his story about the end of Old Mapoon Mission. One evening in 1963 he had been invited to dinner at the mission house. He was, as he described it, ‘all puffed up with himself’ and his importance for this was a great honour. After dinner, there was a loud disturbance outside and his host walked with him to the verandah and Stephen could see people being herded towards the water by the light of burning torches. He raced down to the beach to try and stop them but the men and police had guns. He could do nothing to help his people. After everyone was on board he and another man were forced to break down the village and then it was burnt only the mission house was left standing. The boat departed leaving behind the smouldering ruins of the mission station and Stephen Mark to ‘guard’ it. He was told that the boat would return for him and he was left some flour and tinned milk to see him through until then. When after a couple of months the boat had not returned he feared the worst and as he describes it ‘prepared to meet his maker’. However he managed to flag down a passing boat off Tjungantji Point and hitched a lift to his relocated community at a place known as *charcoal burner*, now known as New Mapoon. He was so glad to be back with his people but they all turned aside from him because



Figure 5: *The remnants of the Mission House at Old Mapoon 1990. In the foreground are Freddy Toboy, Steven Mark, Andrew Kennedy, Tony Barkley and James Bond Snr.*

they thought that he had conspired in the removal. They couldn't see how an important man in the community had been powerless to stop what had happened. It was many years before people accepted him again.

Another man James Bond senior, tells of how he had been working with the ‘Enterprise’ geologists showing them where to find the rocks that they sought. He was away for months at a time and on his final return to his family and home he found only blackened ruins. No-one had thought to tell him of the plans to remove people to Bamaga and he spoke of his despair and fear for his family at the time.

These stories were told to me some years ago when I accompanied several elders from the new community back to Old Mapoon. All that remained of the mission at that time was the skeletal ruins of the old mission house (see Figure 5) and the poorly marked cemetery. This was the first trip back to their homelands that these people had made and it was a very emotional experience. Stephen Mark was one of these people. We set up camp under the shade of an old almond tree which had been planted at the time of the occupation of the mission. There were several trees which acted as markers for the old people – anchor points for their memories. As they walked over the area once the centre of the mission they could be seen to stoop and pick up objects, and then scan the landscape before moving on. This often seemed to be a personal and solitary experience but gradually people reconvened to turn over their memories just as they had physically turned over the artefacts in their hands.

One might expect that people would be happy to see the evidence of this past erased. However the destruction of the mission is not celebrated as the removal of a stain on the history books but rather the wanton destruction of the product of their labour and the devaluing of all the principles that they grew up with. This destruction has contributed to the disempowerment of the elderly in relation to the young in their communities as their experiences are held to be worthless, supplanted by new systems, buildings and settlements.

At Mapoon, under the almond tree, the people ended their stories with the complaint that even their church steeple which they had built was taken off them and given to Aurukun (see Figure 1). No doubt the mission authorities saw this as their property and its re-use as appropriate recycling but to the people who made it this was an inexplicable insult and theft.

Concluding Remarks

Archaeological investigation with its focus on material traces and their meaning can be expanded to refocus on the broader cultural landscape and used '...to illuminate the historical, demographic, or socio-cultural context of mission encounters' (Graham 1998:26). Sutton (2003:78) emphasises the importance of archival material such as maps, plans and photographs in the analysis and interpretation of mission sites that have largely been erased from the landscape. However statistics and archival material alone can lead to an over-emphasis on the control and authority of the mission and underplay the significant role of Aboriginal people in modifying, and resisting authority and overlooks the way in which they appropriated Christianity in specific culturally informed ways. It is just as important to see and understand the way in which tangible objects, ruins and traces act on Aboriginal people and work to evoke memories and feelings.

So here we have an amazing history, cataclysmic events which disrupted the entire fabric of society but the archaeological evidence is ephemeral. The sound of one's trowel in the sand is likely to drown out the whispered stories told by the few old people that remain. The physical evidence is often limited to isolated plantings such as the almond tree which act to anchor people's memories and orient the visitor; unmarked or crudely marked graves and traces of garden edgings dotted here and there through encroaching bush or developing community streets. The process of systematic erasure of cultural heritage as a means of controlling people has proved a useful tool for government over the years and it seems that both anthropologists and archaeologists have also largely been fooled. To address this apparent gap more dialogue is required between the disciplines. Specifically there is a need to employ multiple investigative techniques which include those commonly used by both anthropologists and archaeologists to explore the impacts and legacy of the mission period on communal and individual identity. An archaeological focus is an essential ingredient if we are to begin to explore the way in which Aboriginal people value, respond to and interact with the physical traces of this past as a means of compensating for and undermining the effects of an overt policy of erasure of heritage fabric in northern Cape York.

Silliman (2005) claims that the conflation of the terms 'Contact' and 'Colonialism' has 'proven detrimental to archaeologists' attempts to understand indigenous and colonial histories'. Amongst other things he claims that this conflation has privileged 'predefined cultural traits over creative or creolized cultural products, which loses sight of the ways that social agents lived their daily lives

and that material culture can reveal, as much as hide, the subtleties of cultural change and continuity' (Silliman 2005:55). The idea of creative or creolized cultural products is directly relevant to the investigation of mission sites in Australia. Experience in Cape York suggests that perhaps archaeologists have undervalued the ephemeral physical remains of the Mission period as traces of less integrity and perhaps attesting to a less 'authentic' heritage. Closer collaboration between anthropologists and archaeologists in researching this period of post contact history may lead to new insights.

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