

Excavating MacGregor: re-connecting a colonial museum collection

Aims and methodology



Albizia trees planted in 1870s near the site of the flag raised to mark the British Protectorate at Hanuabada.

Aims

Entering the National Museum of Papua New Guinea (PNGNM), you are immediately confronted by exotic objects from other times, other places, other cultures. Peering into the dimly lit cases, you can just make out intricately carved, woven and painted items adorned with feathers, banana seeds, seashells, bird beaks, pig tusks, dog's teeth, lizard skin, cuscus fur, iridescent beetle bodies. The labels tell of unfamiliar places and strange objects; 'Sepik River,' 'Pineapple Clubs,' 'Goodenough Island,' 'Charm Stones,' 'Wuvulu,' 'Fighting Mask.' The displays are certainly enchanting, but how to make sense of these century-old items now detached from their owners and hanging lifeless and unexplained behind glass panes. The objective of our research project is to re-animate and repopulate ethnographic museum collections from PNG by recapturing the hidden stories embedded in such objects. To reveal the perspectives of the indigenous peoples who bartered the items with colonial collectors, we will tease apart the entangled social relationships that brought the objects into collections like this one.

Moving along, tucked around the corner in a small room are some of the treasures of the PNGNM. Repatriated from Australia, this group of heritage items dating to the late nineteenth century was collected by William MacGregor, the first colonial Administrator. It includes many iconic PNG artefacts: man-catchers, model canoes; tobacco pipes. What can this group of objects tell us about how local groups perceived and reacted to the early colonial government? Taking an object-centred, assemblage-based perspective that envisions the group as a coherent whole, we notice that some types are missing? Toeas, the shell armbands used in traditional exchanges and the model for modern PNG coinage, are not exhibited. Could this be because local people deliberately withheld these precious artefacts to deliberately exclude the colonists from ceremonial transactions? Other objects in the cases also raise fascinating questions. What objects were taken and what were traded? A woven bag removed by MacGregor following his battle against the Tugeri people beyond the British border tells us about items not freely given. In contrast, the deadly looking man-catchers with their sharp spikes were not traditional items, but were fabricated by indigenous artefact traders who benefited by catering to missionary preconceptions (O'Hanlon 1999). Similarly, the tobacco pipes also sold well because appealing decorations were added to a previously plain, functional item. Based on clan symbols, the new designs had a double purpose. Attractive to European buyers, they also asserted the identity of the maker, simultaneously sending out messages to outsiders and other indigenous groups.

Employing archaeological methods of assemblage analysis, we can draw out broad patterns in the collections. These include investigations of variations in the presence/absence or relative proportions of different object types across space and time. Our previous research has already begun to tease apart the sorts of entangled social relationships that characterized relationships in this early British colony (eg, Gosden & Knowles 2001; Knowles in O'Hanlon & Welsch 2000; Clarke & Torrence 2011; Torrence & Clarke 2011 in Byrne et al.; in Harrison et al. 2013; Philp in Cochrane & Quanchi 2007; 2009).

Innovative Methodologies

It has long been accepted that Indigenous people had an active and central role in the formation of museum collections (eg, Thomas 1991; O'Hanlon 1993; Schildkrout & Keim 1998; Torrence 2000; Gosden and Knowles 2001; O'Hanlon and Welsch 2000; Newell 2006; Bolton et al. 2013), but devising methods to closely monitor these in the absence of direct observations has proved to be difficult (Thomas in O'Hanlon and Welsch 2000). The novel and imaginative archaeological methods we will develop further in our analyses of the MacGregor collection, will therefore make an important contribution to international scholarship (eg, Lilje 2013; Clarke & Torrence 2011; Torrence & Clarke 2013 in Harrison et al.; cf. Harrison's discussion of 'archaeological sensibility' in Harrison et al. 2013:20). It is probably fair to say that the enormous scale of the MacGregor collection (13,000 objects) has daunted previous researchers, but the large collection size is a considerable bonus to our focus on assemblage structure since it means that absences and small proportions are likely to be meaningful and not just a result of sampling errors. Long detached and separated from their original social contexts, objects spread across the shelves in an ethnographic museum present the same challenges for interpretation as archaeological finds recovered from excavations. For archaeologists material attributes are the key to reconstructing social relations in the past. By tacking between object characteristics and analogies with living societies, archaeologists reconstruct past actions and perceptions (eg, Wylie 2002). In our case we will be looking at assemblage structure defined as the presence/absence of artifact types or the relative proportion of artefact types. In addition, detailed studies of selected artefact types will focus on the ways they were manufactured and decorated to reveal indigenous strategies.

Conceptual framework, design and methodology

Our inter-disciplinary, collaborative project brings together the differing viewpoints and skills of an international team of archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, and museum professionals to capitalize on innovative approaches to the analysis of historic ethnographic museum collections. We will re-connect the MacGregor collection using the aggregating methodology of archaeological assemblage analysis. For the first time, the inventive re-assembly of this globally dispersed collection through a database and website will enable meaningful comparative research among different parts of the collection. For example, the Tugeri group of objects was split up between museums so that woven bags have been separated from their contents. Reuniting this material and contrasting it with the rest of the collection will provide new information on the types of objects that were normally withheld from exchange with MacGregor.

Re-assembly

Our first task is to track the movements of the dispersed MacGregor collections and then to re-assemble all the objects into a single database. Using detailed research by Michael Quinnell and Christine Wright, we know the location of the bulk of the material, but more forensic studies will be needed to trace further travels through museum exchanges documented through museum correspondence. We will then visit each museum to describe, measure and, where necessary, photograph all objects using a standardized recording system. We will use multiple 'interpretive' categories of activities in our analyses (eg, ritual, domestic, transport) to maximize the potential of exploring differences in assemblage structure across space and cultural boundaries. The museum visits have been scheduled in conjunction with the local collection managers to ensure access and to avoid conflicts due to collection moves at the VM and BM.

Assemblage Structure

Our study of assemblage structure will examine variation among the diverse items offered to MacGregor using the presence or absence of key items, such as valuables or ritual objects, and the varying proportion of artefact types grouped within broad categories that will be combined in several ways to elicit different perspectives (eg, men's vs women's; body ornaments, weapons, ceremonial, domestic, etc.). Deceptively simple, this approach has proved to be powerful in identifying behaviours that reveal the character of social relations (eg, inclusion in indigenous exchange, attracting, discarding, withholding, asserting identity, making new types of objects, or enhancing items through additional or European-oriented styles of decoration) (Clarke & Torrence 2011; Torrence & Clarke in Harrison et al. 2013). Variation across the 178 collection localities with their diverse language groups and differences in length and character of contact histories will provide a key to a broad range of indigenous perceptions.

The large-scale assemblage analyses will be complemented with detailed in-depth analyses of single artefact types using the methods developed to study manufacture and decoration by Lilje (2013; in Bolton et al. 2013) on fibre skirts and Torrence (in Torrence & Clarke 2000) on spears and daggers. Capitalizing on insights of anthropological research on perceptions and adaptations of artefact makers in the Fourth World (eg, Graburn 1976; Phillips & Steiner 1999; Harrison 2006; MacCarthy 2013), we will interpret indigenous reactions and creative adaptations to the onset of British colonialism in this region. We will begin by enlarging the object studies initiated within the ARC LP Producers and Collectors project: eg, tobacco pipes; musikaka mouth ornaments; and model boats.

Comparative collection analyses. To help tease out the social interactions that specifically relate to indigenous conceptions and reactions to British colonial rule, we will compare and contrast our three sub-groups within the MacGregor collection ('official,' Tugeri, and 'private'). A contrast within the MacGregor collection between material freely given and the Tugeri collection of seized objects (Quinnell 2000:87–97) will further refine the study by revealing differences between an 'unbiased' sample of indigenous objects that people carried with them at a single moment in history with the remainder of the collection derived from social interactions through exchange as illustrated in Philp (in Cochrane and Quanchi 2007). A second contrast is between the 'official' and 'private' assemblages. We expect that the 'private' material will reflect special gifts given to MacGregor to cement personal relationships that would benefit the giver. Such items should contrast with the more ordinary material that was normally available during the course of bartering with local groups.

A third comparison will be made between the 'official' material and contemporary collections made by commercial dealers, such as the extensive PG Black collection under study by our network colleague Robert Foster (2012). Variations in assemblage structure will help identify indigenous strategies used in different social settings: ie, commercial trading vs official government business.

References

- Adams, M. 2009. Both sides of the collecting encounter. *Museum Anthropology* 32:17-32.
- A Journal Through Australia. <http://spencerandgillen.net/>
- Anon. 1912. *Catalogue of Specimens Deposited by Sir William MacGregor*. Aberdeen: Aberdeen U. Press.
- Appadurai, A. (ed.) 1986. *The Social Life of Things*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Bolton, L. et al. 2013. *Melanesia: art and encounter*. London: British Museum Press.
- Byrne, S., Clarke, A., Harrison, R., Torrence, R. (eds) 2011. *Unpacking the Collection*. New York: Springer.
- Clarke, A. & Torrence, R. 2011. Archaeology and the collection. *Journal of Australian Studies* 35: 433-448.
- Cochrane, S. & Quanchi, M. (eds.) 2007. *Hunting the Collectors*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Craig, B. (ed.) 2010. *Living Spirits with Fixed Abodes*. Adelaide: Crawford House.
- Craig, B. 1996. *Samting Bilong Tumbuna*. PhD Thesis, Flinders University, Adelaide.
- Davies, S. 2002. *Collected: 150 Years of Aboriginal Art ...Macleay Museum*. Sydney: Macleay Museum.
- Davies, S. 2012. Andrew Goldie: His Ethnological Collecting; Catalogue of Papuan Artefacts. *Memoirs Queensland Museum - Culture* 6:131-160; 163-208.
- Edmundson, A. 2013a. Dreams of empire. In M. Hetherington (ed.) *Glorious Days: Australia in 1913*, pp. 23-33. Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press.
- Edmundson, A. 2013b. *For Science . . . Official Collecting in Colonial New Guinea*. PhD Thesis, ANU.
- Flexner, J. 2014. Historical archaeology, contact and colonialism in Oceania. *Journal of Archaeological Research* 22(1):43-87
- Foster, R. 2012. Notes for a networked biography. *Museum Anthropology* 35: 149-69.
- Gammage, B. 1998. *The Sky Travellers*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press.
- Gosden, C. & Knowles, C. 2001. *Collecting Colonialism*. London: Berg,
- Graburn, N. 1976. Introduction. In N. Graburn (ed.) *Ethnic and Tourist Arts*, pp. 1-32. Berkeley: UC Press.
- Harrison, R. 2006. Kimberley points and the technologies of enchantment. *Current Anthropology* 47: 83-4.
- Harrison, R. et al. (eds) 2013. *Reassembling the Collection*. Santa Fe: SAR Press.
- Joyce, R. 1971. *Sir William MacGregor*. Melbourne: OUP.
- Lilje, E. 2013. *From Maker to Museum: Fibre Skirts from Central Province*. PhD Thesis, University of Sydney.
- MacCarthy, M. 2013. More than grass skirts and feathers. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 19: 62-77.
- Meleisea, M. & Schoeffel, P. 1997. Discovering Outsiders. In D. Denoon (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Pacific Islanders*, pp. 119-151. Cambridge: CUP.
- Murray, T. (ed.) 2004. *The Archaeology of Contact in Settler Societies*, Cambridge: CUP.
- Newell, J. 2006. Collecting from the collectors. In *Cook's Pacific Encounters*, pp. 29-48. Canberra: NMA.
- O'Hanlon, M. 1993. *Paradise: Portraying the New Guinea Highlands*. London: British Museum.
- O'Hanlon, M. & Welsch, R. (eds) 2000. *Hunting the Gatherers*. New York: Berghahn.
- Phillips, R. & Steiner, C. (eds) 1999. *Unpacking Culture*. Berkeley: UC Press.
- Philp, J. 2009. Days of desolation on the New Guinea Coast. In I. McCalman & N. Erskine (eds) *The Wake of the Beagle*, pp. 125-137. Sydney: UNSW Press.
- Quinnell, M. 2000. 'Before it has become too late.' In M. O'Hanlon & R. Welsch 2000 pp. 81-102.
- Schaffarczyk, S. 2006. Australia's official Papuan Collection. *reCollections* 1: 41-58.
- Schildkrout & C. Keim (eds) 1998. *The Scramble for Art in Central Africa*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Thomas, N. 1991. *Entangled Objects*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Torrence, R. 1993. Ethnoarchaeology, museum collections & prehistoric exchange. *World Archaeology* 24: 467-81.
- Torrence, R. 2000. Just another trader? In R. Torrence & A. Clarke 2000, pp. 104-41. London: Routledge.
- Torrence, R. 2002. Obsidian-tipped spears and daggers. In C. Kaufmann et al. (eds), *Admiralty Arts from the South Seas*, pp. 73-80. Zurich: Museum Reitberg.
- Torrence, R. & Clarke, A. (eds) 2000. *The Archaeology of Difference*. London: Routledge.
- Torrence, R. & Clarke, A. 2011. In Byrne et al. 2011, pp. 29-54. New York: Springer.
- Torrence, R. & Clarke, A. 2013. Creative colonialism: In Harrison et al. 2013.
- Wylie, A. 2002. *Thinking from Things. Essays in the Philosophy of Archaeology*. Berkeley: UC Press.