

The first substantial cultural contacts with indigenous peoples documented in writing as well as by photographs and cultural artefacts rank among the most interesting and rarest pieces of evidence in anthropology. In northern Australia, at the Cape York Peninsula in north Queensland, this process occurred through contacts made by colonial authorities, in the main through German Moravian missionaries („Herrnhuter“) who deliberately sought out remote areas for their missions at the turn of and at the beginning of the 20th century.

Today, the documents of these early systematic cultural contacts spanning a total of almost three decades are still extant in the State Ethnographic Collections of Saxonia and in the Moravian Mission Archive in Herrnhut, Germany. They have never been researched since. There are three categories: extensive written documents (in German), a collection of cultural artefacts, and a rare and valuable collection of historical photographs by the missionaries (paper prints, coloured glass slides and glass negatives). Together, these three sources provide unique and complementary insights into the early history of the cultural encounters between Germans and indigenous peoples. They reveal in a singular way how the German missionaries viewed and observed the local indigenous population. This research project aims to conduct the first ever research into these documents, photos and artefacts in an innovative and comprehensive approach to uniting these three different sources.

The ethnological, colonial, photohistorical and mission-history context of the research lies in the specific indigenous cultures and languages of the western Cape York Peninsula, their research history, the characteristic material culture, the colonial and congregational-specific approach of the Moravian missionaries as well as the history of missionary photography in a colonial context.

This research includes a source-critical analysis of the colonial and missionary views of the local indigenous cultures and languages based on multi-tiered research questions. These comprise the positions taken by the colonial, mainly missionary, players based on their mandate and their mission, the patterns of reception and interpretation of the indigenous cultures and the principal chances and limitations to their understanding of foreign cultures. It also includes questions concerning the form and contents of the (re)presentations and reflections on their experiences in their written documents, their photographs and their artefact collection.

This first comprehensive research into the original sources and the publication thereof closes an important research gap from a very early time of contact. It provides access to important research data for the German and Australian public, and it makes substantial contributions to the scientific discourse concerning the perception of and reflections on indigenous peoples presented in original missionary and colonial documents.