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Special points of interest:

- **The Research Project**
- **Introduction to the Research Team**
- **Progress report**
- **Agenda and minutes of the first meeting of the Indigenous Consultative Group**

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Research Project Newsletter

Artefact Transactions in the Wet Tropics

Collection of Aboriginal artefacts from the Wet Tropics of Australia, such as the iconic painted shields and woven baskets, has a long history. This project examines relationships between artefact collectors, Aboriginal producers and their descendants, museums and the state.

We aim to provide the first systematic history of ethnographic collecting in the rainforest region of North Queensland. The research has two components:

1. Historical research

We are particularly interested in archival materials (diaries, letters etc) and published materials that tell us about the transactions between the early European collectors and the Aboriginal producers of the artefacts they collected. We aim to trace how the objects took on different value/s as they changed hands from the producers to the collectors to the museums.

2. Ethnographic research

We are interested in exploring the significance of these museum objects for Aboriginal people today in terms of cultural heritage. This component of the research project includes an exploration of the way contemporary Aboriginal artists engage with museum artefacts in the production of their works.

The full title of the project is: *Objects of Possession: Artefact Transactions in the Wet Tropics of North Queensland, 1870-2013.* The project is funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC Discovery Grant). The Chief Investigators are all members of the School of Arts and Social Sciences at James Cook University and are linked to 'Culture, Agency and Change' research programme, at the Cairns Institute.

The Research Team

The research team includes the following Chief Investigators:

A/Prof. Rosita Henry (Anthropologist)

Dr Shelley Greer (Archaeologist)

A/Prof. Russell McGregor (Historian)

Professor Ton Otto (Anthropologist/Historian)

Dr Michael Wood (Anthropologist)

The research team also includes two Senior Research Associates:

Dr Corinna Erckenbrecht

Dr Maureen Fuary

Also associated with the project are Material Culture/Museum anthropologist and curator:

Dr Maria Wronska-Friend

And the Senior Curator, Cultures & Histories, at the Qld Museum:

Ms Trish Barnard

There is a PhD research scholarship linked to this project.

The scholarship is held by:

Mr Bård Aaberge

Indigenous Research Associates participating as part of the Consultative Group include:

Ms Rhonda Brim

Ms Rhonda Duffin

Mr Roy Gibson

Mr George Skeene

Hermann Klaatsch in Adelaide, 1907

Hunters & Collectors

Research Ethics

An application was submitted to the JCU Research Ethics Committee for approval. The *Values and Ethics in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research, 2003* guidelines will be followed in the conduct of the research. There are six values at the heart of these guidelines: reciprocity, respect, equality, responsibility, survival and protection, spirit and integrity.

The project involves a collaborative relationship between the investigators and Aboriginal research participants. An Indigenous Consultative Group has been established for the project. Members of this group are our research associates on the project.

Acknowledgment and due credit for the role of all research participants will be made in any reports and publications, except where information is given in confidence.

Any report and/or publication will include a statement that our work does not usurp pre-existing property rights in the artefacts that we record, or the data that we collect.

In consultation with the Consultative Group, we plan to develop a **database** and other resources that will ensure the research outcomes will be available to local participants.

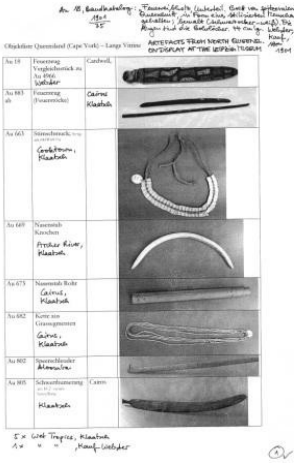
Ethics Approval Number: **H4005**

Progress Report: German Collectors and Collections

The collections in German museums are being investigated by **Corinna Erckenbrecht**. Corinna is the world's leading expert on the German collector **Hermann Klaatsch** and she has recently published a book on him. We are interested in Klaatsch because he spent considerable time in Cairns and the Tablelands collecting artefacts.

In March and April this year Corinna visited the Museums of Ethnology in Leipzig, Dresden and Herrnhut.

While working on our project Corinna developed some insights from her work with Klaatsch into a general model of collecting. This model will inform how we carry out future research on other collectors.



Progress Report: Swedish Collector, Eric Mjöberg

Eric Mjöberg, c. 1920

Eric Mjöberg is a Swedish zoologist who travelled through the region in 1913. Apart from collecting insects and other animal species he made a collection of more than 200 artefacts. 120 of these pieces, ranging from stone tools and bicornual baskets, to throwing sticks and shields are kept by the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm, Sweden, which acquired this collection from Mjöberg in 1920.

Ton Otto visited the Museum in June 2011 and was greatly assisted by curator Dr Håkan Wahlquist and by Anita Utter, who was able to retrieve all pieces from the storage rooms and show them to him. The museum has a policy of making collections available for research and to a wider public on the Internet. A number of Mjöberg's artefacts were already accessible this way.

In connection with Ton's visit the whole collection has now been photographed and can be accessed via the following link: http://collections.smvk.se/pls/em/rigby.VisaObjekt?pin_masidn=1039973

Information on the collection is only available in Swedish so far but there is a very good analysis of the collection in English by Åsa Ferrier.

Mjöberg kept part of his collection for himself and sold off some objects to pay his bills. He also donated some pieces, including a bees-wax figure, to the National Museum in Copenhagen, Denmark. In return he received a royal distinction from the Danish king! Ton visited the Danish museum and with the assistance of curator Dr Bente Wolff, photographed the figure and obtained documentation on the transfer of this object to the museum.

Progress Report: Australia

Russell McGregor focussed his efforts in early 2011 on the Adelaide anthropologist **Norman Tindale**, who visited north Queensland many times between the 1920s and 1970s. His journals, photos and drawings, which Russell examined at the South Australian Museum, provide both information about artefacts he collected and insights into the collector's thinking.

Maureen Fuary has set up an EndNote library for the project based on the searches and reading she has been undertaking. To date, it contains 80+ refs (some with annotations and PDFs attached), and organised according to our Key Themes. Maureen has also located old photos of people in the Wet Tropics, especially those held by John Oxley, State Library Queensland. Because of State Library Protocols requiring community permission by the associated Indigenous groups, only a few of the photos detailed contain the actual photograph. **Maureen** is planning to co-author with **Russell** a publication on W.E. Roth, who was the Northern Protector of Aborigines from 1898-1904, and overall Protector from 1904-1906, and a keen collector of Aboriginal material culture.

Rosita Henry conducted field research at the Laura Aboriginal Dance and Cultural Festival, observing the creative contemporary use of objects (shields, baskets etc). **Shelley Greer** and Rosita met with Valerie Keenan, Arts Manager Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre Gallery & Keeping Place.

Future Work: Archival

Michael Wood is interested in learning how Indigenous property interests in artefacts were outlined in the writings of early collectors. Michael is planning to work on this topic in the first half of 2012.

Rosita Henry and **Shelley Greer** will be investigating collections in France and England in Oct. this year (2011).

Russell McGregor and Maureen Fuary will do archival research on **W.E. Roth** in late 2011. Some of the objects he collected are held in the Qld Museum but most are at the Australian Museum. Artefacts that he collected are also held in international museums such as the Smithsonian Institution. **Russell** will also focus on **Archibald Meston** who, like Roth, was Chief Protector of Aborigines in the early twentieth century as well as a collector of rainforest artefacts. Whether there were any connections between these roles is one question Russell will pursue.

Ton Otto's further work on the Mjöberg collection will focus on the analysis of Mjöberg's written material, and will hopefully include his journals in collaboration with Dr. Åsa Ferrier, who is presently translating them into English. In 2012 Ton will also study the collection made by the Norwegian Carl Lumholtz, and visit the Ethnographic Museum in Oslo.

Corinna Erkhenbrecht will visit the Polish National Museum in Warsaw in March 2012, to conduct further research on the Klaatsch collection held there. It was transferred to Warsaw in 1953 from the university museum in Breslau where Klaatsch was Professor of Anthropology,1907-1916. At the end of WWII, the Germans planned to evacuate collections from Breslau but this never took place. After WWII Breslau became part of Poland and in 1953 all collections were centralised in Warsaw. The numbers on the artefacts, originally done by German curators, were scraped off.

Future Work: Ethnographic

Rosita Henry and **Shelley Greer** will conduct field research at the Cairns Indigenous Arts Fair (19-21 August, 2011).

Rosita, Shelley and **Russell McGregor** are also planning a visit to Cardwell to conduct oral history interviews with local collectors and Aboriginal artists in this area.

Rosita will conduct interviews with local collectors and Aboriginal people in the Kuranda/Mona Mona area during 2012.

Mike Wood will be conducting ethnographic research in the Cairns region during 2012.

JCU Photograph

Protectors as Collectors

JCU Photograph

Indigenous Consultative Group and Research Associates

The consultative group consists of six Aboriginal research associates who have a demonstrated interest in research on museums and objects held in museums and/or who are artists that have engaged with such objects in the development of their contemporary works.

The first meeting of the Consultative Group was held on Tuesday 19th July. A number of people who were invited to participate in the group were unable to attend . However, we will be holding another meeting later in this year.

At the meeting, Rosita Henry presented an overview of the aims and significance of the research project. This was followed by a discussion on the role and expectations of the Consultative Group. Mike Wood and Ton Otto presented summaries of museum and archival research already begun in Europe for the project. Ton Otto provided an account of the research he had done on Eric Mjöberg in Sweden and showed the group the museum website. We were all keenly interested in the photographs of the objects that Mjoberg had collected from our study area. This was followed by an engaging discussion over lunch.

A journalist from the *Koori Mail* joined us after lunch to interview the participants about the research project.

Rhonda Duffin with a small dilly bag made by Rhonda Brim, used as a till to keep money from their Stall at the Laura Festival, 2011
Photo: Rosita Henry

Rhonda Duffin

Rhonda Duffin is a Djabugay elder who lives at Mona Mona, about 30 km from Kuranda. As a young woman in 1990, Rhonda was among a group of Aboriginal people in the Kuranda area who undertook traineeships in Museum studies. Rhonda worked to refresh Jilli Binna, an Aboriginal museum that had been established in Kuranda in 1982, from a static display into a living heritage centre. The aim of the young museum studies students was to work towards revitalising their cultural practices.

The group visited museums in Australia, including the Qld Museum and the South Australian Museum.

Rhonda was instrumental in securing the return to Kuranda of many of the genealogies and photographs collected by Tindale during his field trip to Mona Mona Mission in 1938. She also played a key role in bringing home to Djabugay people, artefacts from various museums. These objects were displayed at Jilli Binna Museum until in closed during the mid-1990s.

Rhonda went to Curtin University in WA where she majored in a Community Development Degree. Today she works in close collaboration with Rhonda Brim in many different projects concerned with "keeping our culture alive" and in their efforts to secure strong and everlasting title for Aboriginal people to the land at Mona Mona.

Rhonda helped Michael Quinn to develop the Djabugay language program and taught Djabugay language in the local school for many years.

"Many people have written about it from the outside looking in but this is written from the inside looking out"

George Skeene

George Skeene

George Skeene is a descendent of the Yirrganydji, Wakaman and Birri Gia Tribes. He has been documenting Rainforest Aboriginal culture for over 15 years. In 1998, after 3 years preliminary investigation, he travelled to Germany to research Cairns area Aboriginal artefacts collected during the 19th century and stored in Museums in Cologne, Frankfurt am Main, Freiburg, Leipzig and Hamburg. George discovered Aboriginal artefacts collected from the Yirrganydji camp on the lower Barron River by Prof. Hermann Klaatsch in 1905 in the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, Cologne. A cross-cultural exchange between the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, the Historical Society Cairns and the Yirrganydji people took place. This was followed by a display of photographs of these objects in the Cairns Historical Society Museum's Centenary Exhibition 1905-2005. Since then George has tirelessly worked to organise the return of the actual objects themselves from the German museum for exhibition in Cairns.

In 2008, George published his autobiography: *Two Cultures: Children from the Aboriginal Camps and Reserves in Cairns City.*

Rhonda Brim

Rhonda Brim is a Djabugay Elder. She is an expert weaver of traditional rainforest baskets from grass, lawyer cane, pandanus and black palm.

Rhonda was taught to weave by her grandmother, Wilma Walker, a Kuku Yalanji Elder from Mossman Gorge. While Wilma was alive they used to run weaving workshops together at the Laura Aboriginal Dance and Cultural Festival.

Rhonda's mission is to contribute to "Keeping Our Culture Alive" by teaching weaving and other aspects of cultural knowledge to the younger generation through workshops held at Mona Mona.

Rhonda has worked hard over the years to ensure the revitalisation of cultural practices among her people. She helped to develop the Djabugay language program with Michael Quinn and taught Djabugay language in schools for over six years.

Rhonda Brim weaving at the Laura Festival, 2009
Photo: Rosita Henry

Roy Gibson

Roy was unable to attend the meeting but has accepted the invitation to join the consultative group.
Roy has a long history of community engagement in Mossman Gorge. For more than twenty years he has worked as a community tour guide and ranger. He was one of the key players in setting up the community run and award winning "Kuku Yalanji Dreamtime Walks".
His interest in and knowledge of traditional artefacts/knowledge have been well established over many years. Roy is also one of the artists at the Gorge, and has previously shown great interest in traditional Yalanji designs for inspiration in his own art. At present, Roy is deeply involved with the development and completion of the Mossman Gateway Project, as well as serving as the chairman of the Mossman Gorge Community Board (Bamanga Bubu Ngadimunku Inc).

Objects of Possession and Obsession

PhD Project: Bård Aaberge

Bård Aaberge has worked with Roy and other Kuku Yalanji people since 2002 when he did ten months fieldwork writing about Yalanji bush skills and how these link with Dreaming stories.

This work continues with his PhD project which will focus on Kuku Yalanji views on traditional knowledge and artefacts in the past and present. This will involve looking at artefacts held in museums, historical documents and photographs, information which will be prepared for Yalanji people to keep or present in their community museum.

Another part of the PhD project includes observation of how Yalanji people relate to this traditional material today. Bård has just started his PhD degree, and expects to work closely with Yalanji people in further developing ideas for his project.

JCU Collection

Some of the Research Team

First Meeting of the Consultative/Research Associates Group

Left to Right

Back: Bard Aaberge, George Skeene, Mike Wood, Ton Otto

Front: Rhonda Brim, Rhonda Duffin, Rosita Henry

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We will be on the Web soon!

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Swedish National Museum Website:

http://collections.smvk.se/pls/em/rigby.VisaObjekt?pin_masidn=1039973

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