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## Archaeology and the colonial encounter

*Kimberley spearpoints, cultural identity and masculinity in the north of Australia*

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the ways in which material objects are invoked and constantly recontextualized as part of the process of cross-cultural colonial encounter with reference to a case study from the northwest of Australia. The study examines the various contexts within which bifacially flaked 'Kimberley points' were manufactured, traded and consumed in post-invasion Australia, and implications for understanding the role of material objects in colonial encounters. Many studies of cross-cultural material exchange note the ways in which objects are given different meanings in different cultural contexts. In contrast, this article considers parallels between the role that points played in developing notions of social identity among antiquarian collectors and Aboriginal people in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly their role in evoking and expressing hybrid masculinities. The manufacture of glass Kimberley points by men who had been dislocated from their traditional country implies connections between the practice of point manufacture and the creation of new, hybrid social identities. The article attempts an

'archaeology of encounter' using these particular objects as a text to be read for both the discourses and forced silences that this colonial encounter created.

#### KEYWORDS

colonialism • cross-cultural encounter • identity • Kimberley points  
• masculinity • material culture • northern Australia

## ■ INTRODUCTION

This article considers a single class of archaeological object, the Kimberley point, as a case study of Thomas's (1991) observations that in colonial contexts social identity is fluid and fashioned out of appropriation and exchange. As objects divested of their function, the craze for producing and collecting Kimberley points as aesthetic objects amongst both Aboriginal people and settlers in colonial Australia needs to be critically examined. There is a tension between archaeological studies of the geographical distribution of Kimberley points and their appearance in a range of different contexts outside of these spaces during the last 130 years. There is also a tension between the values placed on points by white collectors as vestiges of the 'Stone Age', and the dynamic and shifting values attributed to them by Aboriginal people during a period of rapid post colonial cultural change. Many international studies of cross-cultural material exchange note the ways in which objects are given different meanings in different cultural contexts. In contrast, this article considers parallels between the role that points played in developing notions of social identity amongst antiquarian collectors and Aboriginal people in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly their role in evoking and expressing hybrid masculinities. These dissonances and striking parallels are instructive of the ways in which both Aboriginal people and settlers have invoked and constantly recontextualized material objects as part of the process of negotiating identity in post invasion Australia. This case study suggests that material culture can be understood as a site for cross-cultural engagement that allows insights into settler colonialism as it was experienced at a local level.

## ■ THE COLONIAL CONTEXT: INDIGENOUS-SETTLER RELATIONS IN AUSTRALIA, 1788–PRESENT

Most Australian schoolchildren would be able to tell you that Australia was 'discovered' by the Englishman, Captain Cook, and settled by white



invaders in 1788 at the small settlement of Port Jackson, later to become the metropolis of Sydney. This 'discovery' came at the end of a long line of other European and Asian encounters with Australia, although Cook's certainly had the most lasting legacy. The presence of settlers (or invaders) has been a constant determining feature of Aboriginal Australians' life experiences. Similarly, the presence of Aboriginal people has been equally important in defining Australian colonial culture, despite colonial discourses that have explicitly marginalized the Aboriginal presence in the post invasion landscape (Byrne, 1996, 1997; Thomas, 1999).

Australian government policies have had a profound impact on both Aboriginal people and colonial relations in Australia. From the middle of the nineteenth century, Christian missions, state and later federal governments played a major role in the relocation and segregation of Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people were subject to various controls and legislation that isolated and controlled encounters with settlers. Under later policies, individuals were to be assimilated into settler society through processes of removal, most notably those now contested by members of the 'stolen generations' (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997). These Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families and placed under the care of non-indigenous Australians. Although it has much deeper roots, the modern Land Rights movement emerged as a force during the 1970s. Drawing on the rhetoric of 'Black Power', it drew attention to the failure



**Figure 1** Aboriginal stockmen, and manager, Moola Bulla pastoral station, pre-1954. (Courtesy, Battye Library)

of the assimilation project, while asserting the rights of indigenous people to exist as a distinct cultural group within settler society.

The invasion of the Kimberley region by non-indigenous settlers occurred relatively late in comparison with most regions of Australia. Remote and with little infrastructure, much of the Kimberley region was taken up for cattle (and some sheep) grazing by 1900, and Aboriginal people formed a major labour source for this extensive and labour-intensive form of pastoralism (Figure 1). Aboriginal people often formed large community camps on the edges of pastoral stations, where they received rations in return for labour (Figure 2). Unlike many indigenous Australians, Aboriginal people in the Kimberley were generally able to settle on stations that allowed them access to their traditional country. The region's long wet season allowed a 'holiday time' when people were released from work duties, enabling them to return to country and undertake traditional activities and ceremonies (Head and Fullagar, 1997; Shaw, 1992; Bradshaw, 1990). This relationship between Aboriginal people and pastoral labour lasted until 1967, when award wages equal to those of settler Australians were introduced for Aboriginal people. At this time many Aboriginal people were forced off pastoral stations that were unwilling or unable to pay these new rates. Large numbers of Aboriginal people moved into rural towns, causing massive unemployment and overcrowding.

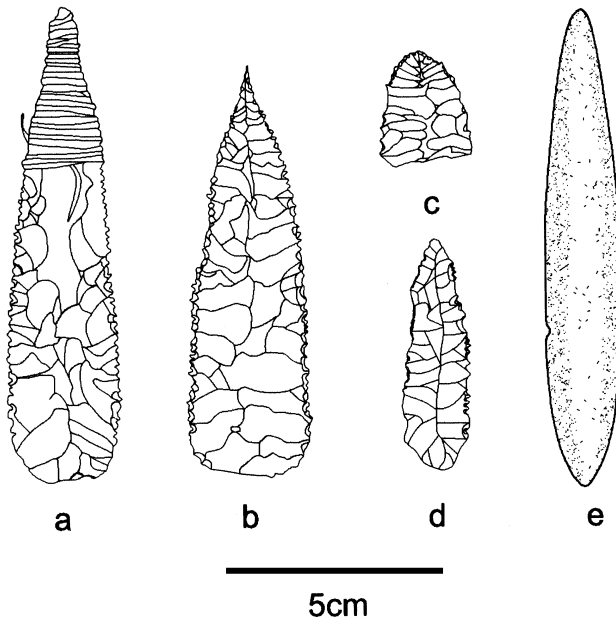


**Figure 2** Pastoral station camp residents, possibly Moola Bulla pastoral station, pre-1954. (Courtesy, Battye Library)



## ■ MATERIAL CULTURE AND COLONIALISM

Like most settler societies, Australia has a long tradition of anthropological and archaeological research concerning the country's indigenous peoples. Following critiques of other colonial contexts (Fabian, 1983; Moore, 1990; Smith, 1999), it is possible to see elements within these disciplines that legitimize the notions of racial difference on which Australian colonial society depends (Byrne, 1996; Thomas, 1999). However, Nicholas Thomas (1994) argues that the colonial project and colonial discourses are in fact a disparate and diverse set of ideologies, rather than a unitary phenomenon. Thomas is particularly concerned with situating the idea of colonialism within the socially transformative projects of both colonizers and colonized. His book, *Entangled Objects* (1991), takes for its case study, colonialism and material culture exchange in the Pacific. On the colonial peripheries, material culture forms a conduit for cross-cultural negotiation. Eschewing theories of creolization, once popular in colonial studies, Thomas discusses processes



**Figure 3** Kimberley points. (a) and (b) glass points with serrated margins (after Akerman and Bindon, 1995): (a) has its point bound with cord to protect it during transport and trade; (c)–(e) surface finds, Old Lamboo Station; (c) broken glass Kimberley point tip; (d) chert Kimberley point; (e) ground metal point made from a horseshoe

of creative recontextualization or re-authorship as objects move between colonizers and colonized. Torrence (2000) provides insightful discussion of the relationships between material culture and trade in colonial contexts that could be read as a companion to the observations presented here.

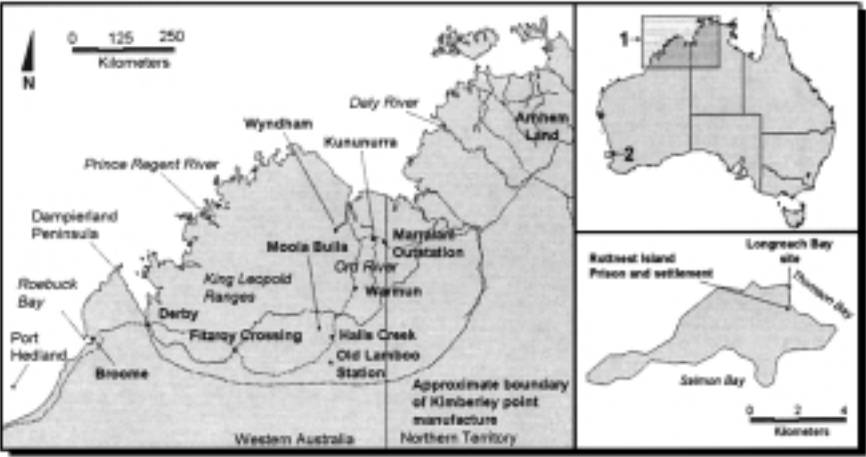
## ■ THE POST-CONTACT INTENSIFICATION IN KIMBERLEY POINT MANUFACTURE

The Kimberley point is a distinctive artefact in the suite of Australian stone tool assemblages. Kimberley points are invasively pressure-flaked over most or all of the dorsal and ventral faces of the artefact, with denticulate or serrate margins (Figure 3). It is the application of the pressure-flaking technique and treatment of the artefact's margins that makes these items unique in Australia (Akerman and Bindon, 1995: 92–3). They range in size from small specimens of 1–2 cm in length to very large pressure-flaked blades of up to 25–30 cm long (e.g. Akerman, 1978; McCarthy, 1976: 43–5). These points were sometimes hafted onto a two part spear shaft (Figure 4) consisting of a hardwood shaft of between 50 and 150 cm length, attached by resin or sinew to a long reed or bamboo shaft of up to 200 cm in length (Akerman, 1978). Points were often traded in bundles, wrapped in sheets of paperbark (Mulvaney, 1985; Spencer, 1928: 511).



**Figure 4** Aboriginal men at Moola Bulla holding spears with hafted Kimberley spearpoints. (Courtesy, Batty Library)

A range of archaeological data collected from the Kimberley demonstrates an intensification in the production of Kimberley points in the period after European invasion, in particular at sites associated with Aboriginal pastoral workers' camps. Kimberley points are one of the few stone artefact forms that have continued to be made until the late twentieth century, incorporating new introduced materials, such as glass, metal and porcelain, while continuing to be manufactured in stone. A comparison of stone tool assemblages at pre- and post-contact sites in the southeast Kimberley associated with the Old Lamboo pastoral station (Figure 5) has demonstrated significantly higher proportions of Kimberley points at post contact archaeological sites (Harrison, in prep). At Marralam pastoral outstation in the northeast Kimberley (Figure 5), Head and Fullagar (1997: 422–3) also note an increase in small stone flaking debris associated with pressure-flaking biface points during the twentieth century. While hunting continued during the historic period, it was common for rations to supplement the diet of Aboriginal people living on pastoral stations. It is curious that pressure-flaked biface points seem to be made in increasing numbers on pastoral station fringe camps throughout the Kimberley at a time when most other items of material culture were being replaced by manufactured 'western' substitutes. It needs to be explained why there appear to be *more* points at sites where hunting should have been *less* important, and in



**Figure 5** Map showing the approximate area in which Kimberley points were manufactured, and places mentioned in the text

circumstances where a range of other existing material culture items had ceased to be manufactured.

Kimberley points manufactured during the last 130 years have also commonly been considered problematic because of the production of ostentatiously large points that would not have been functional spearheads. Akerman (1978) has pointed out that there are two basic classes of Kimberley spearpoint: the first includes microlithic pressure-flaked points of a few centimetres in length, the second, large, invasively flaked points up to 30 cm or more in length. The small points are most likely to have been manufactured as functional spear tips, their size allowing them to be hafted onto the shaft of a long, but very light composite spear, with only the application of a large blob of resin and no lashing of fibre or sinew. This was found to be the most effective spear type for penetration of muscle and flesh, and the small size of the point inhibited breakage when compared to larger stone and glass points (Akerman, 1978: 489). Akerman notes that the larger points:

... seem to have served more often in gift exchanges than as components of functional implements. Several informants told me that their now deceased fathers were known for their exceptionally large and fine points, which were inevitably 'given' to Europeans or to trading partners and friends. (1978: 489)

This lack of utilitarian functionality of the large Kimberley points collected after European colonization has been discussed by Akerman and Bindon (1983; 1995: 96–7; Akerman, 1978). The absence of large, pressure-flaked spearpoints from excavations throughout the Kimberley (Balme, 2000; Fullagar et al., 1996; Harrison and Frink, 2000; O'Connor, 1995; Vietch, 1999), combined with their post-contact role in gift exchanges, suggests that the formal aesthetic of ostentatiously large Kimberley points is post-contact in age and these points did not act as functional spearheads.

There have been few studies that have explicitly considered the antiquity of the pressure-flaking technique in the Kimberley. At present, despite the prevalence of Kimberley points as surface finds in archaeological sites throughout the Kimberley, the oldest firmly dated occurrences of pressure-flaked points in the Kimberley date to between 1400 and 1000 years calBP (Harrison, *in prep*; O'Connor, 1999: 71, 76). O'Connor notes that unlike the standardized and finely worked points produced in the historic period, excavated examples are very variable and tend to be retouched far less (O'Connor, 1999: 71). Some authors have suggested that the large, denticulate pressure-flaked Kimberley point may be entirely post contact in age (McCarthy, 1976: 44; White and O'Connell, 1982: 112, but see Akerman and Bindon, 1995: 97–8). In short, Kimberley points appear to have developed their formal/aesthetic characteristics of the long blade, fine shape and intricate pressure-flaked flutings within the last 120 to 130 years, at the same time that they were becoming functionally obsolete.





## Vignette (1)

30 October 1897. Rottnest Island, southwest Western Australia.<sup>1</sup>

Bulwaring stretched his long thin arms in the warmth of the morning sunlight. The cell into which he had been placed was cold and cramped. White police in Wyndham had sent him to this place that the *kartiya*<sup>2</sup> called 'Rottnest'. His neck and ankles ached from the chains and leg-irons he had worn since his arrest weeks earlier, during which time he was held in the prison of the port.

Travelling first north then south over the water, within days he had lost sight of the last coastal landmark he recognised. He had never travelled this far south, he had no language with which to communicate with the spirits of the lands through which he travelled, and he was far away from his kinsmen and women. On arrival at Fremantle, Bulwaring was horrified to note that this southern land was filled with *kartiya*. The port was crammed with horses, carts, buildings and ships. Even the plants were strange to him; there were no boab trees, only thin, tall Eucalypts and heavy shrub. Later a black man who was different to any black men that Bulwaring had ever seen before would explain in English that before the white people came, *Nyungars* had lived in this place. However, the white people had been here for a long time and had taken over parts of their land.

It was Sunday, and Bulwaring had been up early. On Sundays, the prisoners were allowed out of their cells to hunt and forage freely over the island. Bulwaring sat on a high point above Little Salmon Bay, looking north to where he knew his home and family were. Earlier he had found some glass bottles on the beach in different colours, bright cobalt blue and deep olive greens. He was flaking the bottles into *jimbila*<sup>3</sup> as his uncles had taught him. As a boy he had collected glass and stone with his uncles to make *jimbila* for hunting kangaroo on the grass plains. By using the side of a glass bottle, you could pressure flake all the way around the point to make a spearhead that was larger than would be possible in stone. Bulwaring had not done this for some time, as he had been using metal bullock-shoes to make spear-points for his own use in hunting near Wyndham. The metal shoes were heated, battered and then ground into the shape of a spear-point, but instead of breaking after just one throw like the stone and glass ones did, the metal spear could be used repeatedly. Bulwaring had already broken the tips from two *jimbila* that were close to completion. As he flaked the points he thought about his home. The *Nyungars* in the prison had no knowledge of making these points, but instead used wooden spears with a sharpened tip. He knew that the points he was making would be no good for hunting the small animals on the island as these points were large and would break easily. However the dexterity he displayed in making such large and well worked *jimbila* reflected his skill as a Jeidji man and would make his uncles proud of him. He also knew that if they were fine looking enough, he might trade these points with one of the other prisoners for food, or with the gaolers for extra time away from the prison.

## ■ POINTS OUTSIDE 'TRADITIONAL' BOUNDARIES

Archaeological descriptions and ethnographic observations suggest that Kimberley points have a restricted distribution in time and space. Petri (1954: 49–52) notes that the manufacture of the finest bifacial Kimberley type points occurred in the central Kimberley (Figure 5), from the King Leopold Ranges to the west, and as far east as the Northern Territory/Western Australian border. Akerman and Bindon (1983) note that besides a single occurrence of some pressure-flaked points on the Dampierland Peninsula, the pressure-flaking technique was absent from stone tool technologies from the extreme southwest Kimberley. Kimberley points were not manufactured as far east as Daly River in the Northern Territory, but were traded there in the recent past (Davidson, 1935).

There are several references in the literature to Aboriginal groups receiving glass and stone points by trade *for the first time* over the last 130 years. Tindale spoke about the trade in Kimberley points with Aboriginal men from the government settlement at Moola Bulla in the east Kimberley during the early 1950s (Figure 5) (Tindale, 1985: 11ff.). A Jaru man said that large bifacially worked stone points were traded away to more distant Aboriginal groups. They were wrapped in paperbark, bundles of them being bound with fur string for safe keeping during their journey. Tindale had been shown pictures of these points in Port Hedland and Derby, and saw similar ones in use as circumcision knives in the Western Desert in 1935. These were stated to have come from 'the north', and Tindale calculates that they would have had to have travelled over 1000 km to have got there (Tindale, 1985: 12). Davidson (1934; 1935: 168–70) notes that invasively pressure-flaked Kimberley points had only just begun to be received by trade by the Wardaman, who were unsuccessfully trying to apply the pressure-flaking technique to produce their own points when he undertook fieldwork in the area in 1930. He estimates that the Kimberley points he saw were traded a distance of approximately 400 miles (~650 km) from the southwest (Davidson, 1935: 170). Spencer (1928: 510–11) discusses the southeasterly trade of Kimberley points to central Australia and their presence in Arunta and Warrumunga territories in the early twentieth century. It appears that increases in the extent and intensity of trade in points occurred after the time of European contact, and continued into the recent past.

Points also appear during the last 130 years in a number of locations associated with the forced movement of Aboriginal people from their traditional country. Vignette (1) provides a fictional account of the manufacture of Kimberley points on Rottneest Island, an Aboriginal penal settlement some 4000 km to the south of the area in which Kimberley points were customarily manufactured. Rottneest Island was gazetted as an Aboriginal prison in 1838. During the period from approximately 1870 to 1902 and then, less frequently until 1931, it received hundreds of Aboriginal



prisoners from the Kimberley region (Green and Moon, 1997). There are several collections of Kimberley glass points from Rottnest Island in existence. Green and Moon (1997: 53) note that glass points used to be seen around the shaded slopes of the hills surrounding the prison settlement, where prisoners would wait on Sunday afternoons for their 4 p.m. role call. Most of those points in the collection of the Western Australian Museum are provenanced to areas on the outskirts of the prison settlement, including the area around the salt lakes and the Longreach Bay site (Figure 5; Bindon et al., 1978; Bradshaw, 1990; Dortch, C.E., pers. comm., 2000; Serventy, 1967). There is a tension in the few historical sources that discuss these points between the gaoler's antiquarian appreciation of finely crafted points and a general ban on the possession of dangerous weapons in the prison. This tension may explain the unease suggested by the manufacture of these objects on the fringes of the settlement, away from the surveillance of the gaolers.

Most researchers have assumed that these points were used as functional spear points to hunt the small marsupials that inhabit the island (Barker, 1885: 169; Bindon et al., 1978; Serventy, 1967: 124; Somerville, 1948). As noted earlier, Kimberley points are historically associated with long composite spears used for hunting land game. However, sources mention



**Figure 6** Aboriginal prisoners on Rottnest Island c.1890. On Sundays the prisoners were freed to hunt and fish. Note the spears carried by the men. (Courtesy, Battye Library)

only the use of short or small spears on Rottneest Island. W.H. Timperley, Superintendent of the island from 1883 to 1890, noted:

No weapons which could be used for offensive purposes are allowed inside the gaol, with the exception of kylies (boomerangs). These and small spears with blunt ends were made in plenty by the natives . . . for corroborrees . . . and sham fights. (quoted in Somerville, 1948: 79)

Similarly, Lady Broome describes the spears as 'small' (Barker, 1885: 169). It is unlikely that the 2–3.5 m long composite Kimberley spear would be referred to as 'short' or 'small'. In addition, the attachment of a sharp glass point would clearly qualify a Kimberley spear as something that could be used for an 'offensive purpose'. A photograph of a group of unidentified Aboriginal men hunting on Rottneest Island, from the late nineteenth century, shows the men holding what appear to be short, single shaft hardwood spears without a stone or glass spear point (cf. Figures 4 and 6). I have been unable to locate any documentary reference to men using long composite Kimberley spears on Rottneest for hunting. Kimberley points on Rottneest Island were not being manufactured for hafting onto functional hunting spears and continued to be made as non-functional items even when their manufacture was an illicit activity. This suggests that these objects must have had some meaning in addition to their function as spear points, a meaning which led men from the Kimberley to continue to manufacture them outside of their traditional context of function and use.

Vignette (2)

20 January 1988. Perth, Western Australia.

It was sometime after moving the fireplace that they noticed them, two pieces of glass, one green, the other colourless, which lay glinting near the old hearth. One of the children walked over and picked up the green one, which like its colourless counterpart had been shaped roughly into a laurel-leaf. It reminded her of the spear-points carried by prehistoric cave-men on the television. She was struck by its size, its glitter and translucence. She held the point tightly in her hand; cold to the touch, she felt the fine teeth dig slightly into her skin. While renovating the house in the northern Perth suburb, they had come across many interesting curios, traces of the previous occupants of their new home. A threepence dated 1902, several old pen-nibs, fragments of a letter with a few discernible words and the date '10 September, 1891', old school rulers in imperial measurements. However, there was nothing like these, flaked so carefully on both sides and so sharp and serrated on the edges to the touch. The girl put them both carefully into a folder that contained all of the other curios, closed the folder and walked out of the room. Her father wondered how such things had ever made their way behind the fireplace. They seemed to belong to a different time and place that he found incommensurate with the other objects they had found there.



## ■ 'BEAUTIFUL OBJECTS'

The spear heads made with such skill by natives of N.W. Australia from broken glass bottles, telegraph insulators, and the like, have long been familiar objects in museums and private collections, and need no description here. As is well known, many of these spear heads are really beautiful objects. (Balfour, 1903: 65)

When Henry Balfour wrote these words at the turn of the twentieth century, European settlers had inhabited the Kimberley region consistently for only some 20 years. It took only a few decades for biface spearpoints from the Kimberley and Northern Territory to become commonplace in collections all over Australia and the world. The rapid adoption of the fashion of collecting Kimberley spearpoints is demonstrated by the fact that they were one of the first Australian Aboriginal artefact types to have been systematically studied and described by ethnographers (Balfour, 1903; Basedow, 1925: 367–70; Elkin, 1948; Love, 1936; Mitchell, 1949: 64; Spencer, 1922: case 3; 1928: 510–11; Tindale, 1985). The phrase that Balfour uses to describe the points, '*beautiful objects*', is repeated often in the literature produced by the white antiquarians who consumed these trade points (Elkin, 1948: 113; Love, 1936; Mitchell, 1948). Like many indigenous objects that moved into a Western collectors' sphere, points were often perceived as *objets d'art*, rather than as 'tools' or utilitarian items. This perception coloured early ethnographic descriptions of their manufacture.

When the stone is finally shaped, serrated and complete, *the artist (for artist is the proper name for him)* puts his new spearhead in his mouth, wets it, and holds it up to appraise its beauty and keen point. If it is translucent stone, he holds it up to the light and lovingly ponders over its colour. The men love to choose beautifully coloured stones for the making of spearheads . . . (Love, 1936: 75, emphasis added)

Points were extremely popular among both professional and amateur antiquarians, and rapidly began to appear in great numbers in museum collections immediately after the European settlement of the Kimberley in the 1880s. Points became a commodity for exchange between Australian and foreign museums. For example, a note in the records of the Western Australian Museum in 1909 (Western Australian Museum, 1909) documents the exchange of Kimberley points with the Imperial Academy of Science in St Petersburg for a collection of Russian porcelain. Large quantities of stone and glass Kimberley points were received by many overseas museums by trade through Australian collectors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including the Manchester Museum, the British Museum of Mankind, the Vienna Museum of Ethnography and the Royal Ontario Museum in Canada (Cooper, 1989; Lewis, 1977). Eventually Kimberley points were so numerous among collectors that they became

ubiquitous; I have collected a number of personal accounts of householders in Perth coming across caches of Kimberley points behind fireplaces (see Vignette (2)), in old cupboards and among second-hand store collections. These were obviously not items held by specialist collectors or antiquarians, but as curios by settler Australians who had obtained them because of the flood of points that were circulating amongst collectors.

## ■ WHY KIMBERLEY POINTS? A DISCUSSION

### Glass as a raw material

The introduction of bottle glass as a raw material for the manufacture of Kimberley points may have played an important role in the intensification of trade and manufacture that occurred during the recent past. Love (1936: 75, also Tacon, 1991 for Arnhem Land) has discussed the importance of colour and lustre of stone materials used in point manufacture. During discussions with Aboriginal people in Halls Creek, I was told that the colour and texture of particular stone types was important in their selection as raw materials, in the same way that flakeability was important. The colour and texture of stone raw materials is often the result of the actions of 'Dreaming' beings in the landscape. In the case of this quartz stone source in a story told by Hector Sandaloo from Warmun community in the east Kimberley, a wedgetailed eagle caught a female kangaroo called Parawul.

After that, Wedgetail flew east, carrying Parawul across the big blacksoil plain on the other side of Warmun. You can see a big white rock there in the middle of the blacksoil plain. That is part of the trail. From the white rock he kept going east till he came to a place called Ashburton Spring . . . He stopped there and said to himself 'I'll have to hide this Parawul.' Today she is still there, you can see a clear white rock. (Sandaloo, 1996: 8–9)

Similarly, some lustrous haematites from near Elcho Island on the north coast of Arnhem Land were highly prized and traded because their colour connoted arterial blood (Evans and Jones, 1997: 415; Jones and Meehan, 1978). The transparency and brilliant colours of bottle glass would have been attractive to Kimberley people, given that they considered these qualities important. Indeed, Love records that young Worora men often competed to make the most attractive point, holding them up to the light to compare them (Love, 1936: 75–6).

### Control of raw materials and power

Control of stone quarries often formed the power base of individuals and groups of older powerful men in the Kimberley and Arnhem Land (Jones



and White, 1988: 55; Tacon, 1991). Access to the *Ngilipitji* quarry in Arnhem Land, from which highly prized quartzite for the manufacture of *Ngambi* spearpoints was obtained, was strictly controlled according to kinship and law (Evans and Jones, 1997: 415; Jones and White, 1988). In the east Kimberley, the *guruwa*<sup>1</sup> quarry on Old Lamboo station was 'owned' by a group of men. Payment, in the form of trade items, allowed others the right to access and remove stone raw material from the place (Harrison, 2000, in prep). Stone from this quarry formed one of a number of prized items traded throughout the east Kimberley in exchange systems described ethnographically as *wunan* (e.g. Kaberry, 1939: 16–17). Control of raw material sources was thus an important aspect of masculine status, prestige and power in northern Australian Aboriginal societies.

Given the traditional concern with control of raw material sources, such as stone quarries, by older, powerful men, and the belief in some northern Australian groups that power was inherent in stone itself (Evans and Jones, 1997: 414–17; Jones and White, 1988; Tacon, 1991), the adoption of glass as a raw material must have influenced the very structure of Aboriginal societies in this area. No longer did younger, less influential men need to gain access to the traditional stone sources, but instead they could increase their status through competing to make the most decorative glass Kimberley points, for trade. Although it is often stated that glass points would not be practical for use as a hunting weapon (Akerman, 1979), it is also possible that they were used by some individuals to escape the need to defer to elders who controlled stone quarries. Aboriginal informants from Halls Creek noted that glass points were 'no good for hunting kangaroo', and were made 'just for practice', but that they could be used for hunting if there was no alternative available. The appearance of this new raw material for point manufacture facilitated competition between traditional and hybrid social structures and is likely to have exacerbated stresses within the power structures of Aboriginal societies during the recent past. Power over raw materials was an integral element of masculinity, thus avoiding traditional power structures facilitated the creation of new masculinities. This observation accords well with that of Sharp (1952) who studied the impact of the introduction of steel axes among the Yir Yiront in north Queensland. Changes in trading patterns weakened the importance of social activities that revolved around ritual and social exchange, while creating new forms of dependence on white trading partners who could exploit this dependence to impose authoritarian structures on Aboriginal people (Sharp, 1952: 83–6). While in the Kimberley there was a clear requirement for alignment with white traders, I prefer to see this as initiated by young Aboriginal entrepreneurs who actively negotiated a space for themselves in a changing, post-contact world. Glass Kimberley points were an integral part of the new social symbolism associated with this negotiation.

## Cross-cultural trade in material objects and social relations

Yet there is more to the process than bypassing traditional power structures, as Aboriginal people who chose to do so became immediately entangled in a complex web of social relations with the white people whom they engaged in exchange. One of the few records of a white, female collector of Kimberley points, Ada Peggs, illustrates the fluid flow of material objects between Aboriginal people and settlers in colonial Australia. She spent several years in the Roebuck Bay area of the Kimberley at the turn of the twentieth century, and her letters home to England were later arranged to form a paper to the Folklore Society (Peggs, 1903; see discussion in Benterrak et al., 1996). Peggs was interested in acquiring indigenous objects, and was assisted by the other white settlers who had access to objects through their authoritative roles over Aboriginal people.

On Tuesday, Mr Macpherson (the superintendent) gave me over a dozen black cowrie shells, and Mr Kenny three glass spear heads, which the prisoners in the prison opposite where we are living had made; one is of white glass, one green, and one dark smoke-colour. (Quoted in Benterrak et al., 1996: 114)

Similarly, Elkin (1948) enlisted the assistance of two missionaries at Forest River Mission to acquire Kimberley points and information about their manufacture. As Benterrak et al. (1996: 113) note, Ada Peggs does not question her right to acquire objects from Aboriginal people. Implicit in her observations about the inequality of the objects exchanged is the notion that such a transaction must take place.

The natives here are so primitive that they do not know the value of money, and instead, for a days work, are paid with a stick of tobacco or a pannikin of either flour or rice . . . King Ross sent me a kylie by Mary when she went to his camp. Yesterday at six o'clock a.m. he and Pollie came along. He brought me another kylie, two nulla-nullas, and a walker-berrie, for which he wanted sixpence. I gave it him willingly, although it is the first time I have given money. He also had a drink of tea and a piece of bread and jam. Such small attentions please the natives . . . (Quoted in Benterrak et al., 1996: 113)

Clearly there is more in this exchange than a transaction of physical objects, although that in itself is an important transaction. Further to the physical exchange is a social relationship, an alliance of King Ross with Ada Peggs that allows him to control the flow of material objects between Peggs and other Aboriginal people.

One of the most potent symbols of the power of Europeans over Aboriginal people was that of technological superiority. Thomas describes this as one of the colonial 'just-so' stories:

The central motif of the story . . . is the gap between primitive tools and manufactured things of white men: the magic and abundance of the latter





are the source of the asymmetry between powerless natives and dominant European colonisers. (Thomas, 1991: 34)

The discussion of the primitiveness of Aboriginal material culture is a central focus of European and settler Australian discourses of the indigenous 'other'. Points and spears were collected as symbols of a 'savage' and primitive culture. Perhaps more importantly, the appropriation of European materials into Aboriginal material culture was seen as inevitable in the light of the inherent superiority of these materials themselves. Although colonial discourses about Aboriginal people often centred on the physical difference between Europeans and Aboriginal people, they focused on the artefacts that Aboriginal people carried and the clothing that they wore. Items of material culture were seen as pivotal to the perception of a difference that was manifest in the body itself. The incorporation of Western materials into indigenous material culture spoke powerfully to the proponents of colonial 'doomed race' theories (Griffiths, 1996; McGregor, 1997). In the same way that Aboriginal racial characteristics were considered to be 'weaker' than Caucasian attributes (McGregor, 1997: 161), it was believed that indigenous material culture would necessarily be 'bred out' by contact with superior European technologies. The process of incorporation of settler material culture into indigenous technologies was considered to mirror biological processes that were occurring within the bodies of Aboriginal people themselves.

## ■ KIMBERLEY POINTS AND MASCULINITY

A repeated theme in Aboriginal life histories from the Kimberley and the Northern Territory is the importance of work to the construction of a personal identity and sense of self-worth (Baker, 1999; Kimberley Language Resource Centre, 1996; Lukin Watson, 1998; McGrath, 1987; Rowse, 1987, 1998; Ross and Bray, 1989: 38–46; Shaw, 1986, 1992; Sullivan, 1983). Before the 'universe of Kimberley Aborigines came to be divided between the pastoral order and its dangerous exterior' (Rowse, 1987: 81), during the period of first contact and settlement on the fringes of pastoral stations, mission reserves and ration camps, there developed a need to redefine traditional ways of expressing status and personal identity in response to rapid and drastic social change. During the transitional phase, men needed to find ways of expressing self-worth and to develop a sense of identity that was not dependent on hunting. Skill in point manufacture was one of the avenues for this expression. This would seem to be indicated by the high numbers of Kimberley points present on contact sites and station camps in the Kimberley, despite the apparent decreased prominence of hunting in the diet.

Mrs Connie Jugari's husband<sup>5</sup> from Halls Creek recalled the ritual context of point manufacture in detail.

Yeah . . . well, you know what they do is they used to gettem one *big* lump, one of those . . . things like that . . . one like that one [points to large lump of rock outside vehicle on the ground] . . . that *jimbila*, and they puttem in the hot ashes for, say from morning . . . gotta dryem out that rock . . . gotta cookem now . . . till about, next morning they pull em out, leave em outside, then get another rock, they *splittem* . . . they split quick . . . and they get . . . chippinem from there now, then split another one, holdem, keeps comin out now, you know . . .

. . . if you drink water it will break everything . . . That's the *law* with that, that *jimbila* . . . yeah . . . you gotta starve yourself of water, and no drink . . . till you finish *all* that, see? And then you can go back. If everything all come good, it's alright . . . you can go back and have a feed now.<sup>6</sup>

Ethnohistoric accounts of the Worora by Love document that:

. . . boys and youths that have not been initiated as full members of the tribe are not allowed to try making these stone spearheads, of which the Worora are justly proud. (Love, 1936: 75; see Kaberry, 1939: 163 for similar statements)

Spearheads were only allowed to be made by initiated men, and the manufacture of Kimberley points was dictated by rules set by Aboriginal law. Women apparently never made stone or glass spearheads (Bird, 1993: 24; 14 and 163; various pers. comm.; Kaberry, 1939: Halls Creek, 1998). The manufacture of points was both a privilege and an outward sign of having undergone various stages of initiation. Skill in manufacture and use of Kimberley points was one of the ways in which Aboriginal men in the Kimberley and elsewhere sought to gain status and prestige. During inter-language group meetings that would take place near Old Lamboo station, men would lay out their finest Kimberley points on the ground for others to admire, later holding their spears fanned out behind them like peacocks' feathers as part of the display of fine point manufacture that preceded hunting or ritualized fighting (Harrison, in prep). Kimberley point manufacture seems to have been an activity that is related to concepts of 'maleness' and masculinity in Kimberley society, and was symbolic of the male hunting pursuit. The increase in frequency of manufacture of points in the contact period appears to be at least in part associated with changing symbols of masculinity associated with coming to terms with new ways of life on fringe camps, where large groups of people were often camping in close quarters.

On pastoral stations in the Kimberley, Aboriginal men were increasingly drawn into a social world that emphasized individual action as a way of gaining prestige. This largely stood in opposition to traditional ways of gaining status that would have taken into account age and gender, and



would have been specific to a particular place or social forum. The emphasis on the skills of individual stockmen in cattle work thus produced a social system which was focused on individual skill, rather than position within the group. One is struck by the sense of competition that the display of Kimberley points represents. In addition to being an outward display of masculinity and a privilege of having gone through various stages of initiation, the competition to make the most aesthetically pleasing points by men at meetings, such as those discussed above, represents the movement of the culture of the individual from the world of the pastoral station into more traditional contexts. This recalls Baudrillard's (1994) observations of the personal role of collected objects. Collections as the foci for aesthetic things divorced of their physical use derive from the desire to construct alternate discourses in which the individual has total control over its signifiers (Baudrillard, 1994: 24). Points in this context represent the negotiations of individual desire and aspiration, simultaneously referring to traditional culture whilst engaged in the transformation and recontextualization of both the individual and the group.

## ■ COLLECTORS

The role of Kimberley points as an expression of masculinity and as a de facto symbol of hunting prowess in the Aboriginal groups that created them is mirrored by the role they played among non-indigenous collectors. By focusing their collecting activities on hunting weapons, Victorian and Edwardian collectors emphasized the masculine nature of the activities of collecting, while drawing analogies between the gentlemanly pursuits of collecting and the hunt (Griffiths, 1996). In the same way that Aboriginal men at Lamboo would display their points and boast about having the largest, most aesthetically pleasing spearheads, the act of display was of great importance to those Europeans and settler Australians that collected Kimberley points and other Aboriginal artefacts. Stories of the masculine pursuit of their acquisition were equally important to collectors. Ion Idriess (1938) describes in great detail the manufacture and collection of glass and stone Kimberley points in his book *Over the Range*. Like many of Idriess's books, *Over the Range* is an adventure story of masculine pursuits in the remote outback, written primarily for an urban audience in Australian cities and overseas. It emphasizes the remoteness of the Kimberley area, the harshness of the bush environment, and focuses on the activities of the author and other men. The activity of point acquisition is thus set within the framework of a masculine outback adventure story. Similarly, May Vivienne, a female collector of Kimberley points, cannot help but mention that one of the points in her collection was used to kill a man.

I possess three spear heads from the Kimberley district, one of which gave the death blow to a man from whose chest it was extracted. (Vivienne, 1901: 55)

Although technologically inferior, Kimberley points were 'beautiful objects', and were consumed as representative objects of 'noble savagery'. Points were objects of a timeless, primitive aesthetic, and represented the skill of Aboriginal people who belonged to a culture that was unchanging, exotic and outside modern time. Balfour notes that:

I sent some biface points made by the Worora tribe to the British Museum and the reply came back that they were the most beautiful spear-points made by any natives in the world. (Balfour, 1951: 274)

As Thomas notes (1999: 109), cultural colonization in settler societies proceeds most effectively through developing national narratives that situate indigenous people firmly in the past and in a process of decline (Byrne, 1996), while settlers are identified with the future and all things new. It seems incongruous that at the same time that they were being used in such dynamic ways by the Aboriginal people who produced them, Kimberley points were understood by settler Australians as vestiges of a primitive stone age and as symbols of social and technological inferiority. It is ironic that what was essentially a 'modern' item of material culture that developed its formal characteristics largely in response to changes occurring in colonial Australia should be used to represent Aboriginal people as primitive and technologically 'timeless'. There is a strange tension here between the *similarity* in the use of Kimberley points in each cultural group to highlight the masculinity of certain activities or spaces, while in a cross-cultural context points are used to emphasize cultural *difference*.

## ■ TECHNOLOGY AS EMBODIED SOCIAL PRACTICE

Much of what Kimberley point manufacture is about is modern, in that Kimberley point manufacture attempts to deal with post-colonial problems. However, the structural associations between Kimberley points and masculinity draw on much deeper symbolism. Pre-contact rock art described by the author from the southeast Kimberley show hybrid spear/men, complete with genitals, and large groups of people wearing headdresses and holding spears as part of apparent ritualized display (Harrison, 2000, in prep). This suggests a pre-contact association that was realized in the recent past through the development of a formal aesthetic for the manufacture of distinct, ethnically visible material items. The proliferation and formalization of Kimberley points can be best understood through a focus on the social context of the manufacture, trade and use of these objects. This focus



sees technological production as embodied social practice (Dobres, 2000), producing knowledge of the physical world through interactions with it that are both personal and social. Material culture is thus a medium for expressing, affirming and contesting social values and world views. The manufacture of glass Kimberley points by dislocated Aboriginal men is a way of re-affirming identity and ethnicity through both *poièsis* and *praxis*, in the use of a manufacturing technique and production of an artefact form unique to the Kimberley. The act of production of Kimberley points is linked directly to the creation of ethnicity with regard to both settlers and other Aboriginal people. Kimberley men were Kimberley men in part simply because they could make Kimberley points. The manufacture of Kimberley points is not only an acknowledgement of the maker's masculinity (as a privilege of having gone through various stages of initiation), but of their identity as a member of a particular ethnic group. By manufacturing points in glass, Kimberley men were realizing the symbols for a new, hybrid social system with clear links to the traditional.

## ■ CONCLUSION

The increased emphasis on the production of Kimberley points, which was stimulated by internal social changes and a new market in the form of trade with Europeans, allowed Aboriginal people to negotiate issues of masculinity and social identity, while re-creating the relationship between people, object and place. The modern meaning that was given to Kimberley points by those Aboriginal men who manufactured them contrasts with their use in representations of the 'indigenous primitive' by European settlers and others that consumed them through trade. However, parallels between their implications for concepts of masculinity among European collectors and Aboriginal people suggest the ways in which objects of cross-cultural exchange can also transfer meaning from one side of the colonial frontier to the other. Material objects have their own 'inertia' in the process of cross-cultural exchange that may sometimes 'drag' meaning and understandings from one culture to another. The shifting, transforming role that points played in developing notions of social identity among antiquarian collectors and Aboriginal people in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries hints at the localized complexities of colonial encounter and entanglement. Cross-cultural material exchanges are thus a powerful site for understanding the localized experiences and consequences of settler colonialism.

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## Notes

- 1 These fictional passages draw on Daisy Bates' account of the prison on Rottneest (Bates, 1938), along with Neville Green and Susan Moon's (1997) account of the prison in the book *Far from Home*.
- 2 Word used in various Kimberley languages to describe non-Aboriginal people.
- 3 Word used in various Kimberley languages to describe Kimberley points.
- 4 Jaru word for distinctive white silicified sandstone used in the manufacture of Kimberley points.
- 5 Mrs Jugari's husband is deceased and cannot be mentioned by name.
- 6 Interview with author at Halls Creek, 24 July 1997.

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