

Ethnographic Artefacts: the Iceberg's Tip

If the shallows can supply such 'inestimable stones'
what may not the deep have held? (G.N. Teulon *in* Curr, 1887:187)

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ABSTRACT. The Australian Museum has over 2000 ethnographic artefacts from south-eastern Australia and these form a major data base for any inquiry into the material culture of this region's Aboriginal inhabitants. Unfortunately this collection is not totally representative since most of the ephemeral items discussed in the ethnographic literature, items that greatly add to our understanding of the richness of Aboriginal life, are not represented. This paper provides an explanation as to why this is so.

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Perhaps the first scholars in the Australian context who could be termed *material culturalists* were D.S. Davidson and F.D. McCarthy. These anthropologists were interested in defining the basic culture of the Aborigines who first settled the Australian continent as well as in identifying internal and external influences leading to changes in Aboriginal material culture. The decades of the 1930s and 1940s saw material culture studies expand as institutional support improved and public interest was fuelled by the publication of books and articles. Davidson's distributional research laid the foundation for the material culture inquiries McCarthy would later undertake. Davidson's contribution to Aboriginal ethnography lay in his *Geographical Distribution Theory*. This theory sought to reconstruct the historical development of a culture trait or complex by interpreting the chronological relationship between the relative geographical position which the trait had successively occupied (Davidson, 1928:17). He developed

Wissler's idea of culture areas for Australia because he thought group unity was not characteristic of any continental area (Davidson, 1928:7; Peterson, 1976: 53). The term *culture area* designated a region:

...in which the sum total of the culture of its inhabitants is characterised by general peculiarities which will allow for its ready differentiation from another region selected on the same basis... It is only the composite features of all the traits taken in the aggregate which may serve as a basis for separating one area from another.

Culture complexes were formed when traits (either concrete objects or abstract notions) became closely associated and acted as units. The history of a complex was, in effect, the sum history of its traits. Davidson sought to ascertain whether the origin of a trait was indigenous to Australia or whether it had been introduced. By focusing on a trait's geographical distribution, Davidson argued that the historical process of diffusion

could be traced. He hypothesised (1937:62), for example, that: i) traits which had a common appearance in Australia but were absent in New Guinea, were either of indigenous origin or were brought in by invaders who obviously did not come from New Guinea; and ii) traits which had a widespread distribution in both Australia and New Guinea had diffused from New Guinea.

He also argued (Davidson, 1928:8) that the geographical centre of a culture area tended to be the culture centre as well.

McCarthy (1936) was critical of the *Geographical Distribution Theory* because he was unwilling to accept the principle of an indigenous origin for certain Australian traits (e.g., the pearl shell pendants of the Kimberleys, *kopi* widow's caps, certain gum cements and *kadaicha* shoes). McCarthy stressed that Davidson's conclusions were premature; he felt they could only be substantiated when details of Melanesian and Oceanic material cultures were included in the analysis. Both scholars believed archaeological investigations would provide the means of checking the chronologies of material traits as indicated by the distributional evidence. Archaeological evidence would also allow the question of changes in material culture to be more clearly defined.

In the 1940s it was not known whether Aborigines had been in Australia for one or many thousands of years. It was generally believed that successive waves of inhabitants (Tasmanians, Australians, Papuans, Melanesians and Malays) had added to the process of material culture change. When Elkin (1945:8) discussed the antiquity of the human settlement of Australia he suggested that, at the commencement of Aboriginal occupation, the preceding Tasmanian group was already living in continental Australia. However, as a result of the later occupation, he felt the Tasmanians must have been either conquered, absorbed into the newly dominant population or forced south across Bass Strait. The Tasmanian material culture suite lacked elements which either arrived or developed in Australia since the isolation of the island: the spear-thrower, the barbed spear and the boomerang.

Material Culture Distribution and the Single Culture Complex

McCarthy believed that Aboriginal material culture had not remained static. He thought Davidson's reliance on culture areas or complexes to demonstrate change through time was inappropriate. Instead, he treated Australia as a single culture complex with areas of regional variation. McCarthy sought to establish the limits to, and define the mechanics of, the diffusion of objects by focusing on the nature of trade in the Australian context. After examining the distribution of several object types he proposed a number of internal and external trade routes as a means of documenting the exchange of traits within and between clan and tribal

groups. By linking distant material culture connections, he believed the relationship between trade routes, cultural trends and possible migration routes could be ascertained (McCarthy, 1939:405).

McCarthy's trade routes coincided with the migration paths discussed by Elkin (1945). The diffusionist studies of this period stressed a north-south culture flow. The major northwestern migration path was from the Kimberleys down through the Western Desert and from there into south-western Western Australia and the Great Australian Bight. The eastern migration route commenced at Cape York. From here two possible routes emerged. One moved down the west coast of the Cape and then along Queensland rivers like the Diamantina and Cooper into South Australia. The alternative route followed the Queensland east coast southwards, moving on to the Barwon River, Darling Downs and finally down the Darling/Murray Rivers to South Australia.

In 1940 *Mankind* published McCarthy's *Australian Aboriginal Material Culture: Causative Factors In Its Composition*. This paper dealt with that "...ubiquitous problem of the ethnologist, independent invention versus diffusion..." (McCarthy, 1940:241). In this article McCarthy listed 116 traits with wide distribution in Australia as well as in Tasmania, Torres Strait, Papua, New Guinea, Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia. It was hardly surprising, therefore, to read in his conclusion that he believed the problem of Aboriginal culture composition, as he saw it, was intrinsically bound up with that of Oceania (McCarthy, 1940:314).

If we examine the donations and acquisitions made by McCarthy for the Anthropology Division of the Australian Museum during the period 1920-1964, we discover that in any year other than 1949 (when artefacts collected during the Australian American Arnhem Land Expedition were registered), a Pacific, particularly Melanesian, collecting bias was evident. The archaeological and ethnographic material acquired during this period documented in a very explicit manner McCarthy's own curatorial interests. For example, during this period Australian and Oceanic archaeological material represented approximately 64% of the Division's acquisitions. Pacific ethnographic material represented approximately 27%, whilst the Aboriginal ethnographic material represented only approximately 9%. In 1949 the Australian-American Arnhem Land Expedition collection boosted the Aboriginal ethnographic component to 55%. Archaeological material totalled 15% and the Pacific material made up the remaining 30%.

The paucity of Aboriginal ethnographic material acquired for the collection between 1920-1964 reflected not only McCarthy's research interests but also contemporary social attitudes. These were influenced in turn by the various government-sanctioned segregation and assimilation policies. The material collected during the Arnhem Land expedition reflected, in the same way, the institutional and academic bias still operating well into the sixties; i.e., 'real' anthropological investigation could only be conducted among 'traditional' Aboriginal communities. Not until the 1970s did the Anthropology

Division's acquisition priorities and research endeavours take a broader view of Aboriginal culture by incorporating contemporary, transitional material culture that represents an ongoing process of change.

McCarthy treated Australia as a single culture complex with areas of regional variation. Factors causing regional variation in the material culture assemblage were: i) availability of raw materials; ii) processes of change: modification, adaptation, substitution, elaboration; iii) mechanics of change: diffusion, trade; and iv) independent invention.

His Eastern Australian Region included New South Wales, Victoria, eastern South Australia and south-western Queensland. The characteristic material culture traits of this region were hardwood parrying shields; spear-throwers (spindle type with solid peg); single-piece bark containers and canoes; carved trees; concentric diamonds in a field of chevrons; incised work on wood; hunting nets; coiled mats and baskets. An examination of the more ephemeral objects associated with burial and initiation ceremonies reinforces the distinct character of this region.

McCarthy identified coastal New South Wales, central New South Wales and the Darling River valley as three sub-areas or areas of local variation within this Eastern Australian Region. However, he did not identify or examine areas of local variation in either Victoria or south-western Queensland. The traits associated with the three New South Wales sub-areas were (McCarthy, 1940:251): i) coastal: pleated bark canoes and containers; paddle type spear-thrower; plain boomerangs; shields with detachable handles; outline rock engravings; cremation and the elouera type flake industry; ii) central: mound graves; tree carving; earth figures in initiation ceremonies on Bora grounds and grooved conical stones; and iii) Darling River valley: cylindro-conical stones, *kopi* grave markers; widows' caps; hammer dressed rock engravings; incised boomerangs; quartzite adzes and grooved axes; and the tula type flake industry with associated hand axes and cores.

Investigations using these areas of local variation as their initial point of inquiry must ask what the distribution patterns of these traits actually indicate. Peterson (1976:53,66) discussed the limited significance of the boundary generated when single trait maps were produced. The superimposition of several trait maps often led to some degree of convergence between boundaries, but the significance of the new boundary still remained to be explained.

Material culture inquiries can be enriched when intra- and inter-tribal comparative studies are undertaken and when ethnohistorical reconstructions are attempted. Most dissertations produced in Australian anthropology departments throughout the previous 30 years (e.g., Sullivan, 1970; Ross, 1976; White, 1986) have included a chapter titled *Material Culture*. These chapters are fairly uniform; examples can be cited where references to artefacts from particular areas are documented. Evidence is compiled to furnish the chapter with a list of artefacts belonging to the 'traditional' material culture suite of a

particular community. Raw materials, artefact types and simple functional descriptions are provided. Investigations dealing with artefact manufacture, function and context are restricted to the information contained in the source material. Although some studies (e.g., Sullivan, 1970; Ross, 1976; McBryde, 1978; White, 1986) link this information to museum collections, it is rare to find examinations extending to the comparison of material culture suites belonging to adjoining or distant communities. It is rarer still to uncover inquiries which address the question of why particular suites were limited to particular areas in the first instance. This is dependent, of course, on what the aims were of each study.

Some Cultural Traits Re-examined

After becoming familiar with the Australian Museum's ethnographic collection at the Australian Museum, one of the first questions I asked was how representative was it of south-eastern Australia. When digesting the information available in ethnohistorical articles and comparing the artefacts discussed in these sources with the collection in storage, or the material on public display, it became evident that many gaps existed in the collection. Museological inquiries have revealed that availability of material, curatorial interest and institutional bias all contribute to the ultimate shape of a collection and this is certainly true in the case of the Australian Museum. Most of the ethnographic artefacts collected prior to 1882 were burnt in the Garden Palace fire. Any material culture inquiry using this collection as its basic research tool starts, therefore, with an incomplete inventory.

The following discussion compares a class of artefact largely overlooked by Davidson and McCarthy in their distributional work: the ephemeral objects used in burial and initiation ceremonies. I have restricted the discussion to artefacts used in such ceremonies because these ritual areas are historically well documented and the range of artefacts used in them is impressive. For the purpose of this study, the definition of ephemeral object will embrace not only manufactured objects but also unmodified materials such as bark, boughs, leaves, feathers and ochre which were used for a specific purpose and then discarded.

Burial Customs

Throughout Aboriginal New South Wales, the preferred method of disposal of the dead was by burial. Other forms of disposal (cremation, disposition in trees, disposition on the surface) were recorded, but infrequently. While the external manifestations of any burial serve to identify and differentiate group behaviour, similarities in belief and procedure throughout south-eastern Australia reveal this diversity to be largely a variation on a common

custom. The *kopi* grave markers, widows' mourning caps and cylindro-conical stones that are so common to the west of the Darling River are rare to the east. Mound graves and carved trees have a limited distribution (Etheridge, 1918; Black, 1941) but analogous objects such as painted trees and posts have been reported in areas where only scrubby bush existed (Parker, 1905:94). Low mounds of earth were constructed in all Australian states except Tasmania (Meehan, 1971:64). The mound graves in central New South Wales were made from stone or vegetation or both.

Coastal New South Wales. In 1905 Mathews published an account of the burial of a male member of the Thoorg tribe on the south-east coast of New South Wales near Narooma. The body of the deceased was placed full length between two sheets of bark. The corpse and bark wrapping were then bound and secured with string. Two *muyulus* or initiated males later climbed the tallest tree within sight of the camp and called out to the spirit of the deceased (*bulubulaty*) to return to the body. When the spirit and corpse were re-united, identified by noise coming from the bark wrapping, a grave was dug in soft ground and the body and its bark covering were placed in it. The body was laid full-length on its back with the head pointing towards the traditional country of the deceased's mother. If the individual died within his mother's territory, his head would be laid to the west so that when his spirit sat up his face would be warmed by the rising sun. The mourners and initiated males had their faces, bodies and limbs smeared with pipe clay and red ochre (Mathews, 1905:69-71).

When a married male died certain customs were observed by his wife and other female relatives. The widow's hair was covered with a mixture of white bird down and pipe clay. Kangaroo teeth and echidna claws were bound in her hair and on top of her head was fastened a *barran* (net) which hung down between her shoulders. Her face was painted with small daubs of white and red ochre and she wore a forehead band smeared with pipeclay. Ringtail-possum fur string with small pieces of attached bone were tied around her arms and a possum fur belt was suspended from her waist (Mathews, 1905:71). Her chest and limbs were smeared with streaks of white and red ochre. During the extended mourning period the widow did not converse with anyone, but every day she chanted and mourned (Mathews, 1905:72). The deceased man's weapons and other belongings could only be used by his brothers.

From this account, four main points emerge: i) the main part of the burial ceremony was conducted by initiated males, identified in the literature as sorcerers, wizards or doctors; ii) the corpse was wrapped in bark sheets; iii) the mourning period for widows was identified by her dress and speech restrictions; and iv) the use of a deceased man's weapons and belongings were restricted to members of his immediate family.

Darling River Valley. Similar points also emerge in the burial customs of the Euahlayi, Ngemba and other

Darling River tribes. Mathews (1905) and Dunbar (1943, 1945) were familiar with the burial customs of the Ngemba community. They recorded the use of mound graves, cylindro-conical stones and concavo-convex, oval *kopi* grave markers.

Among the Euahlayi, burial practice could differ. Dunbar (1943) recorded a burial in the fully flexed position: a grave was dug and the body was placed sitting and leaning backwards with the face toward the east or sunrise. The face was bent forward with the chin touching the chest. The individual performing the burial packed the body in position with sticks and earth. Weapons and other personal property of the deceased, and cylindro-conical stones shaped by the women, were placed in the grave at the feet of the corpse. Bark was then placed over the corpse and the depression filled in.

The grave was not fenced but just left as a mound of earth which was identified by the presence of cylindro-conical stones or slightly concavo-convex, oval *kopi* grave markers. In some cases a piece of bark was removed from a tree south of the grave and marks similar to the cicatrices on the chest of the deceased were cut into the bark (Dunbar, 1943:146). Dunbar also recorded that burial places could be seasonal camp sites or camp sites isolated by floods and sites adjacent to or on sand hills. After a burial ceremony the huts of the original camp were burnt and a new camp was established (Dunbar, 1943:145).

Mourners at these burials observed certain rituals: widows wore *kopi* caps and scarified their breasts and arms (Dunbar, 1943:145). The relatives of the deceased also participated in the custom of token mortuary cannibalism (Meehan, 1971:31). Before the burial a piece of flesh was removed from the corpse. This was later consumed by the deceased person's relatives in order to "...render the partaker strong and steadfast in purpose and to acquire some of the wisdom of the deceased..." (Dunbar, 1943:145).

Bark coffins were also a feature of the burial customs of the Euahlayi tribe from northern New South Wales. Parker (1905:85) described the burial accorded to an elderly female:

"...Her body was placed in a coffin...made of bark cut off right round a tree, split on one side from end to end; the body was placed in this, then the bark lapped over it, the ends were blocked up with other pieces, the whole secured by rope..."

The coffin was later placed in a prepared grave, the floor of which was spread with twigs. The woman's digging stick, rug and bag containing all her possessions, were placed in the grave before it was finally covered with sticks, twigs, saplings and earth. Parker described how the mourners at the burial cried and how the daughter of the deceased lacerated her body with a sharp stone. The grave was covered with logs and boughs and the area around the grave was swept clean. A unique feature of the Euahlayi burial was described by Parker as a painted upright post (Parker, 1905:94). This post served to mark all of the graves on the Narran River. Further south carved trees served to identify grave sites.

After the burial the mourners were cleaned, not only to disinfect themselves against any disease, but also to keep the woman's spirit away (Parker, 1905:87-88).

An Aboriginal informant told Parker that the ceremony she witnessed differed from those of an earlier time: the mourners were not wearing decorative ornaments around their waists, wrists, ankles and knees, nor were they painted. In this region the process of cultural breakdown had commenced prior to Parker's interest. The disintegration of the Darling River tribes was accompanied by an even swifter disintegration of their ceremonial practices.

In 1936 Goddard reported the unearthing of a mound grave at Tankerooka, between Wilcannia and Tilpa. Seventy *kopi* widow's caps were recovered from the grave of a female. The body had been covered in beefwood bark and was buried in the fully flexed position. The unearthed *kopi* caps were unusual because every one had a *mundilla* or cylindro-conical stone thrust through it.

Details of some of the burial practices of the Aborigines living around Wilcannia and Mount Murchison in the Darling River sub area were published by Bonney in 1884. He recorded that among these people the feet of the corpse were tied together by the big toes and the hands were tied either by the wrist or thumbs and little fingers. The body was wrapped in a rug which was bound with rope. Unlike Dunbar, he observed corpse bundles being tied to long sticks known as *moolairee*. Two male corpse bearers carried the body hanging from one stick to the grave site, which was not far from the camp. The earth was initially loosened using a sharp pointed throwing stick (*pirrah*) and then the loose earth was shovelled out using a wooden bowl (*yokudjah*). The base of the grave was lined with boughs from the broom bush; the body was separated from the sticks and was laid in the grave. The corpse was partly unwrapped and a piece of flesh or some hair was removed. Before the corpse was covered the male mourners cut their heads with boomerangs and let their blood drop onto the corpse. Sticks were then placed over the body and long sticks were driven into the ground at the head and foot of the grave to prevent wild dogs from unearthing the body. The grave was covered with a low mound of earth, dead timbers, green boughs, and finally egg-shaped pieces of white plaster (Bonney, 1884:133-135). The Australian Museum has fifteen examples of this artefact in its collection. They are described as 'gypsum grave markers' and all are from the Darling River area.

After a death the entire camp would move to a new location. The widow wore a mourning cap made of calcined selenite or gypsum. Goddard (1936:25) stated that the net underneath the gypsum was made of closely woven emu leg sinews. Gypsum was also smeared over the widow's face and body. This practice ceased when the widow was instructed by her late husband's brother or her mother that the mourning period was over (Bonney, 1884:135). The weapons and personal property of the deceased were left in a tree for about two months. They were then washed and used by the deceased person's immediate relatives.

The Australian Museum's collection contains examples of the following artefacts: carved trees, gypsum grave markers, mourning caps and cylindro-conical stones. Other artefacts identified with burial practices, for example, forehead bands, possum string armlets, skin cloaks, kangaroo teeth and echidna claw ornaments and possum string waist-belts are not represented in the collection. Their survival depended not only on the durability of the materials from which they were manufactured but also their value to European collectors, not to mention grave robbers.

Initiation Ceremonies

In south-eastern Australia there was substantial agreement in the ceremonies concerned with initiation. Throughout south-eastern Australia, tooth avulsion and hair depilation were features of the initiation ceremonies of males. Captain Tench reported that "...the deficiency of one of the fore teeth of the upper jaw..." was common amongst the Aborigines of Port Jackson (Tench, quoted in Fitzhardinge, 1979:46). To the west of the Darling River circumcision was practised. The tribes inhabiting the land on either bank of the Darling River were unique in that they were typically south-eastern Australian, yet they also exhibited influence from the northwest. The Bagundji tribes west of the Darling practised the western rite of circumcision and those in the south and east practised the eastern rites of tooth avulsion and hair depilation.

The land mass bordered by the Great Dividing Range and the Darling River represents approximately one third of New South Wales. The major groups occupying this area are the Kamilaroi and the Wiradjuri. The Kamilaroi live in the country between the Liverpool Ranges and the Gwydir River. The Wiradjuri occupy land from the Murrumbidgee to the Lachlan Rivers. Given such large territories, the similarities in the initiation ceremonies of the two groups is remarkable. The manner in which information was communicated, the layout of the initiation grounds, the presence of particular artefacts, the prescribed routine and the treatment of initiates, showed little variation. The accounts which follow will focus on the role ephemeral artefacts played in these ceremonies last century.

A Kamilaroi initiation ceremony: the Gundabloui Bora. In 1894 an initiation ceremony was held at Gundabloui on the Moonie River near the Queensland border. Prior to its commencement, lengthy and complex logistical preparations were involved. The host Kamilaroi headman despatched a messenger to all of the groups invited to attend the ceremony. The messenger was from the headman's class and in each community he visited he addressed headmen of the same class. On his journey the messenger was accompanied by an initiate and his guardian. The initiate, the messenger and the guardian were painted with red ochre before they approached an

unfamiliar camp. This red ochre indicated that they were Bora messengers. The messenger took a bullroarer, wallaby skin apron, a belt and several boomerangs with him. These were inspected by the headmen of all the camps he entered (Mathews, 1895:320, 1898:55). It was the host community's duty to prepare the initiation grounds: a raised earth ring 22 m in diameter. The central feature of this public space was a 3.5 m high pole which had a bunch of emu feathers fastened on top. There was a 1.5 m wide opening in the wall of the ring. It was through this opening that the initiates and their guardians left the ring to embark on their instructional journey.

The ring was surrounded by a bush fence. There was a track connecting this ring to a smaller, private, instructional enclosure (15 m diameter). This second ring had no opening. The initiates and their guardians had to step over an earth wall to enter and leave. In the centre of this ring were two *waddengahly*, seats formed out of the inverted stumps of saplings. These seats, and the initiated males who sat on them, were smeared with blood collected from their arms which had been cut with sharp pieces of flint or shell (Mathews, 1895:325).

The path connecting the two ceremonial rings was surrounded on either side by raised three dimensional earth carvings. Among the animal, human and geometric motifs were representations of the mythical beings *Baiamai* and his wife *Gunnanbeely*. *Baiamai's* fire was a dominant feature on the path leading towards the smaller instructional enclosure. The path also led to raised earth representations of huts and graves and was bordered by carved trees.

The Bora initiates were ornamented. They were smeared with red ochre and grease, their necks were decorated with necklaces and their hair with feathers (Mathews, 1895:418). The initiates were given a guardian and presented with a wallaby skin apron suspended in front by means of a waistband (Mathews, 1895:421). Each night the bullroarer (*murrawan*) was sounded to test the courage of the initiates. They were not expected to exhibit any signs of fear. After a week of such activity the bullroarers were shown to the initiates, their significance was explained and, later, they were destroyed. The front incisor teeth of the initiates were not removed at this ceremony although their hair and beard were singed with a fire stick. Eagle, hawk or swan feathers were later placed in their hair. When the initiates returned to the main camp they were ritually cleansed. They remained secluded from the women and children until they returned to their own territory (Mathews, 1895:426).

A Wiradjuri initiation ceremony: Buleraga Creek. Several artefacts, identified in the Gundabloui ceremony, appear in the Burbung ceremony of the Wiradjuri. The initiation grounds consisted of two earth rings connected by a bush track. The large rim contained a 2.5 m high pole decorated on top with bushes and emu feathers. The track was surrounded by raised earth carvings and carved trees. It contained *Baiamai's* fire

and it led to an area containing two inverted sapling seats (*woongoweera*). These seats were stained with blood. Initiated men pierced their gums or the flesh under their gums with sharp pieces of bone or steel and spat the blood onto the seats (Mathews, 1896:301).

The messengers carried bullroarers wrapped in skin and one or more aprons in a bag (Mathews, 1898:58). These were presented to and inspected by the headmen receiving the invitation to attend the ceremony. In 1893, when Mathews interviewed the men who attended the Bulgeraga Creek initiation, it was revealed that the front incisor tooth was not removed nor was the hair singed. Apparently these practices had not been conducted for years (Mathews, 1896:312).

At this ceremony each initiate was dressed by his sister and her husband who later acted as the boy's guardian. His body was painted with red ochre and grease, a few pipe clay marks were made on his chest and swan feathers were placed in his hair. Each initiate was given a waistband which had four aprons: one in front, one at each side and one behind. A wide and narrow forehead band completed his dress.

As with boys, girls were ready for marriage only after they had undergone an initiation ceremony. Amongst the Euahlayi a female initiate was removed from the main camp by an elderly female relative. The couple remained separated from the main camp for many months. Parker (1905:56) described how the initiate was made to swallow smoke, was smeared with red ochre and white gypsum and was showered with swansdown. The initiate was given a kurrajong fibre forehead band (*gnooloogail*) into which feathers were inserted. Wearing a waistband, apron and possum fur and sinew string armllets, "...the toilet of a *wirreebeeun* was now complete..." (Parker, 1905:57). As the months elapsed the initiate's camp moved progressively closer to the main camp. Eventually the initiate entered the main camp and was presented to her husband. At the conclusion of the initiation ceremony the initiate was presented with the artefacts used by her in adult or married life.

Amongst the Wiradjuri the promised wife or *buddungan* presented her future husband with the following (Parker, 1905:65): i) a *wullunggaiir*, or forehead band, painted red; ii) a *gambun*, or narrow brow band, painted white; iii) a *willa willa*, or cockatoo feather top knot; iv) a *dhullabulga*, or kangaroo rat skin strands worn suspended from the front of a waist band; v) a *kurbubundhan*, or possum fur waistband; vi) a pair of *buggurbundhan*, or woven possum string armllets; vii) a *gudyugang*, or reed section necklace; and viii) a *baigur*, or kangaroo skin neck ornament fastened onto possum fur string. In return for these gifts the sister of the husband presented the *buddungan* with a complete set of woman's regalia.

Discussion on Burials and Initiations

Between 1895 and 1905 R.H. Mathews published 95 articles on the ethnology of the Australian Aborigines.

In most cases the articles were succinct eye witness accounts and interpretations of the ceremonies, customs, languages and the social organisation of a number of Aboriginal groups inhabiting south-eastern Australia. These articles possibly contain the most authentic information originating from this period. They are primary sources of ethnohistorical and anecdotal information. In them Mathews described artefacts used in a variety of secular and non-secular activities. Some of these artefacts found their way into the ethnographic collection of the Australian Museum (Mathews, 1898). Mathew's documentary endeavours were substantial but his anthropological interests were not unique. Many early explorers and settlers in NSW wrote accounts of the Aborigines with whom they came in contact. K.H. Bennett, L.E. Thelkeld, F. Bonney, M. Bundock, K. Dunbar and K. Parker all lived among Aboriginal groups who were experiencing post-contact social and economic disruption. From their descriptions of Aboriginal social organisations, material culture and vocabularies, it is possible to identify some of the complexities of Aboriginal life and learn how the communities coped with change.

Each author was fascinated with the diversity and ingenuity observable in 'traditional' Aboriginal material culture. Their accounts record their interactions with the people with whom they had daily contact. No account offered any deep consideration of the reasons underlying group behaviour nor did the authors attempt to analyse the material culture suite. This is where the work of Davidson and McCarthy gains importance. Their research endeavours were on a larger scale. They attempted more than just description because they had at their disposal examples of Aboriginal material culture from across the continent as well as information relating to social customs, religious practices and economic survival. The conclusions they drew were valid in as much as they examined a large pool of material with specific research questions in mind.

The Australian Museum's collection contains mourning caps, egg-shaped grave markers and cylindro-conical stones. Sadly, other artefacts mentioned throughout the ethnographic literature relating to burials and initiations are missing. Items associated with dress and ornaments such as forehead bands, armbands, waistbands, aprons, hair ornaments and ornaments made from leaves or emu feathers are not present. Graphic artists such as the Port Jackson painter, Francois Peron, T.R. Browne, Louis-Claude Freycinet, G.C. Jenner, Joseph Lycett and Thomas Watling captured their appearance, thus lending strength to the ethnographic record (Mulvaney & White, 1987). Several items which served specific functions at the ceremonies, such as throwing sticks, containers and carrying sticks, are also poorly represented in the collection.

Most ceremonial objects were ephemeral. After use they were destroyed or discarded. The *waddengahly* seats and the decorated poles, for example, are only known to us via historical sources. Some of the bullroarers survive because Mathews (1898) obtained them from his

Kamilaroi and Wiradjuri informants. Most of the other items described in the literature have not survived. The Australian Museum's ethnological collection from south-eastern Australia contains only the larger and more obvious items of material culture relating to everyday life. Most of the artefacts were collected from unattended camps or souvenired after skirmishes. As with other ethnographic collections, many of the artefact groups from south-eastern Australia derive significance from numerical superiority rather than from social importance. Clubs, boomerangs, shields and spears account for 83.4% of the collection. Artefacts associated with dress, for example, body ornaments and netted objects represent only 1.7%. The artefacts associated with burial and initiation ceremonies are only boosted through the presence of 71 carved trees representing 5% of the collection. The widow's caps, message sticks, wooden tablets, bullroarers and dance wands account for only 2.7% but it is clear from the ethnographic literature that these artefact groups played a more important role than their museum numbers would indicate. The issue of how to mesh the ephemeral with the tangible in any distributional study is problematic and therefore requires consideration. Likewise, distributional studies relying on museum collections without reference to the ethnographic literature are likely to be weighted incorrectly.

The distributional research undertaken by McCarthy when he was Curator of Anthropology at the Australian Museum, coupled with the distributional maps produced by Davidson nearly fifty years ago, still remain the basic provenance tools for most south-eastern artefact types. McCarthy was the first to identify the *Eastern Australian Region*. However, the characteristic traits he identified for this region and the three sub-areas of local variation were not exhaustive or complete. Clearly many artefacts belonging to a ceremonial context were not included in his analysis. Their inclusion would strengthen the distinct nature of the Eastern Region.

The Australian Museum uses the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies area map as the key to its storage and information retrieval systems (Fig.1). The regional subdivisions adopted by AIATSIS are based on a combination of topographical and state boundaries (Peterson, 1976:55). There is a fair degree of convergence between the area S, E and D boundaries of this map and McCarthy's coastal, central and Darling River Valley sub-areas. In 1986 the Australian Museum was in the process of producing a photographic catalogue of its ethnographic holdings from New South Wales. The main purpose of the catalogue was to facilitate Aboriginal access to the collection. The preparatory work was undertaken by Dr R. Lampert, who grouped all artefacts from the state into functional groups, which were further subdivided into still tighter typological groups. Shortly after joining the Museum I worked on the catalogue and as an exercise plotted the distributions of Lampert's original artefact groups to ascertain whether the groups had restricted distributions. Unprovenanced objects were spread

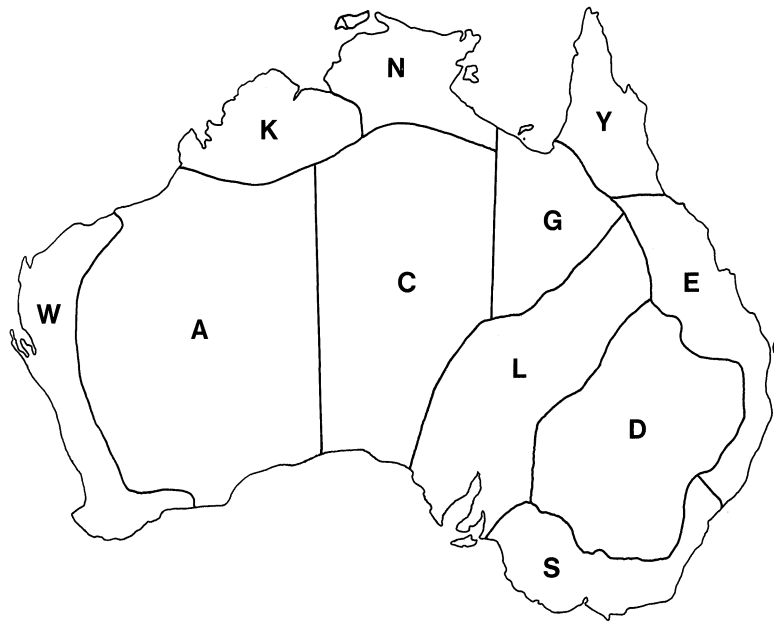


Fig.1. Regional sub-divisions adopted by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra. Source: Peterson, 1976: 57.

throughout the New South Wales ethnographic collection and I hoped the distributional information gleaned from the research may be of use as a provenance tool. The distributional information obtained from this exercise supported McCarthy's areas of local variation. Several artefact groups (e.g., dance wands, carved trees, widows' caps, reed spears, unbarbed and unhafted spears, hardwood parrying shields, weet weets and incised boomerangs) had very restricted distributions and the emergence of the Darling river as a definite cultural boundary was noticeable. Artefact group moved up and down this river but the same artefact groups rarely extended across both banks.

Whilst work in this area is continuing a more complete regional material culture map will only be produced when ephemeral artefacts, such as those discussed in the ethnographic literature, are given due consideration and weight. The difficulty with this approach is that, although the ethnographic record is rich in its description of ephemeral artefacts from south-eastern Australia, these same objects are largely absent from museum collections. Perhaps it is because Davidson and McCarthy focused on the tangible that their distributional work is enduring.

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