

Negotiating Social Identity through Material Practices with Stone

PIP RATH¹  AND NINA KONONENKO^{2,3} 

¹ Independent scholar, Australia

² School of Philosophical and Historical Inquiry, University of Sydney NSW 2006, Australia

³ Geosciences and Archaeology, Australian Museum, Sydney NSW 2010, Australia

ABSTRACT. Dazzling, highly retouched obsidian stemmed objects comprised part of the material world of people in West New Britain and beyond in Papua New Guinea sometime between 6000 and 3000 years ago. Geochemical characterisation studies of the region's obsidian sources indicate that the source of Kutau-Bao dominated to the point where stemmed artefacts made from its obsidian have been found in abundance on nearby Garua Island where another obsidian source, Baki, is located. Furthermore, stemmed artefacts made from Baki obsidian are not found anywhere else except on Garua Island. Studies suggest the nature of production involved centralised knowledge and practices with specialist knappers located on Garua Island. We explore two different approaches in order to look at how such organisation was accomplished. Firstly, we conducted replication experiments to identify characteristic debitage of aspects of stemmed artefact making. Then, the debitage attributes identified were used to examine excavated material from three sites, one near the Kutau-Bao source and two on Garua Island to try to understand the practices employed at the two sources. Our results suggest that Garua Island was a special place where knappers came and used the Baki source to learn, practise and hone their skills for making these dazzling artefacts.

Introduction

Two forms of large, elaborately retouched, stemmed obsidian artefacts that were made prior to 6000 BP and ended by 3000 BP in West New Britain, Papua New Guinea, have long caught the attention of researchers in the area (Casey, 1939; Araho *et al.*, 2002; Rath and Torrence, 2003; Specht, 2005; Torrence, 2004a, 2005, 2011; Petrie and Torrence, 2008; Torrence *et al.*, 2009, 2013a, 2013b). The reduction sequences for the two forms have been identified and described (Araho, 1996; Araho *et al.*, 2002: 66, fig. 7; Fullagar, 1993a, 1993b; Rath and Torrence, 2003: 121, fig. 3). The two forms were made on different kinds of blanks, one on a blade (Type 1), the other on a specialised flake called kombewa (Type 2) (Araho *et al.*, 2002). The processes for the two forms encompassed complex, staged sequences, requiring different sets of skills, knowledge and decisions at various stages. The Type 1 blade form was made generally on a large blade with a triangular

or trapezoidal cross section on which a relatively small retouched stem was bifacially formed, more often than not at the bulbar end of the blade. The Type 2 form was made on a kombewa flake by splitting a nodule to create a bulbar surface. A flake was then removed from the ventral side of the split nodule by a blow struck across the bulbar surface. The resulting kombewa blank preserves the bulbar surface on both sides of the flake. The flake blank was retouched to form a stem, the position and form of which varied. The stems on both forms were pronounced with well-defined shoulders or waists. In contrast to Type 1 artefacts, Type 2 forms varied widely in size, and this has been interpreted as reflecting the use of the larger ones for ceremonial purposes and the smaller ones for more mundane activities (Araho *et al.*, 2002; Torrence, 2004a). Research on the manufacturing sequences shows that the makers of the large Type 1 and 2 forms would have required training, practice and great skill. In this paper we focus of the large, elaborate forms of both types.

Keywords: West New Britain; experimental replication; apprentices; skilled knappers; social identity; social landscapes

Corresponding author: Pip Rath prath@bigpond.net.au

Received: 19 November 2020 **Accepted:** 30 November 2020 **Published:** 12 May 2021 (online only)

Publisher: The Australian Museum, Sydney, Australia (a statutory authority of, and principally funded by, the NSW State Government)

Citation: Rath, Pip, and Nina Kononenko. 2021. Negotiating social identity through material practices with stone. In *From Field to Museum—Studies from Melanesia in Honour of Robin Torrence*, ed. Jim Specht, Val Attenbrow, and Jim Allen. *Technical Reports of the Australian Museum Online* 34: 107–118. <https://doi.org/10.3853/j.1835-4211.34.2021.1746>

Copyright: © 2021 Rath, Kononenko. This is an open access article licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original authors and source are credited.

