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# Aboriginal Material Culture in Australian Museums

*The origin of Aboriginal collections in Australia and overseas has recently become the subject of numerous studies. Colonial museums have become intricately linked to the colonial practices of dispossession and appropriation, and museum interpretations of indigenous peoples' history have been brought under scrutiny. This paper explores the tradition of collecting, classifying, documenting, storing, displaying and protecting Aboriginal material culture in Australian museums and other institutions. This tradition, developed from the nineteenth century colonial discourse, represents ongoing challenges for curators and Aboriginal communities alike. As meeting places of European and indigenous cultures, museums remain important landmarks in the history of indigenous peoples and cultural institutionalism.*

Key words: museum collections, Aboriginals (Australia), colonial museums, museum ethics, museum praxis, acquisition of museum materials, documenting of collections, classifying of collections,

## Introduction

In the survey and subsequent analysis of Aboriginal artefacts deposited in Australian museums, one comes to the inevitable conclusion that what today exists in their repositories and on occasional displays, is a mere (and meagre) reflection of very few aspects of Aboriginal everyday life and spirituality. The reasons for this are numerous, and in this paper I shall examine some of the more obvious.

The process of uncovering Aboriginal material culture in Australian institutions is a tedious task. Concentrating on the material culture of one Aboriginal group makes it even more challenging, as Aboriginal cultural remains are often scattered throughout the continent and require extensive periods of travel to collect and analyze the data. Museum research was only one component of my project which focused on the traditions of a single Aboriginal group (the Gamaroi) from northern New South Wales.<sup>1</sup> While this fact limited the extent and scope of my research, its results are applicable to Aboriginal Australia in general. There is no Aboriginal community which, at some point in time, did not experience some form of cultural genocide. The practice of collecting played a crucial role in the process. In this paper, I explore the methods of acquisition, classification, documentation, storage and display of Aboriginal material that contributed to the cultural dispossession of Aboriginal people.

## Unveiling the dust

Prior to the twentieth century the general practice of Australian museums was to send some of the obtained Aboriginal artefacts to British and other European museums, either as a matter of courtesy or a token of good will towards the British Crown or in exchange for other items as indicated in Carol Cooper's report *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collections in Overseas Museums*.<sup>2</sup> My research, however, concentrated on the contents of Australian state museums, university museums, and some of the local Aboriginal museums, galleries and keeping places in south-east Australia.

The information on the number, type, condition and public/research accessibility of Aboriginal artefacts in Australian museums was gathered in Melbourne (July 1997), during the research trips to Sydney (May-June 1997, September 1998, December 1999), Canberra (August 1997), Adelaide (April-May 1998) and Brisbane (October 1998), during the field trip to northern New South Wales (July-September 1999) and, to a lesser extent, through correspondence and from the media, including the Internet. The situation described may change in the years to come, due to, among other factors, the fact that some of these institutions were (and still are) in a delicate process of ongoing negotiation with Aboriginal communities, in particular regarding the repatriation of culturally sensitive material. Often it was written material that directed my search, especially that published from the 1850s to the 1920s, that is, during the period of double significance for the preservation of culture of most

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<sup>1</sup> The project was undertaken as the major requirement of my doctoral degree at the University of Melbourne, from February 1997 to October 2001. The other two areas of my investigation were historical records and Gamaroi oral histories.

<sup>2</sup> Cooper, C. (1989) *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collections in Overseas Museums*, The Institute Report Series, Canberra, Aboriginal Studies Press for Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.

Aboriginal groups of inland New South Wales and Queensland. Firstly, the beginning of this period was the time immediately after the invasion, during which the local Aboriginal groups still (and I would say considerably) maintained their traditional identity, which ensured that the main body of their knowledge was still greatly intact. Secondly, this situation enabled, and indeed inspired, a number of amateur and later professional anthropologists (or, more suitably for that time, ethnologists), to broaden and modify the existing speculations and beliefs of their contemporaries, including the public at large, about the Australian "noble savages". As an increasing number of individuals roamed the extensive plains of inland Australia in search of the knowledge and material objects of, what was a general belief at the time, the "fast dying-out Aborigines", Australian museums' directors and curators delighted at the prospects of enriching their collections with the presumably last remnants of a culture "on the verge of extinction".<sup>3</sup> This situation was actually very likely to contribute to the further, this time also culturally legitimized, eradication of the sacred Aboriginal lore. On the one hand, it encouraged Europeans to go to the area and obtain, we may surmise often under questionable circumstances, Aboriginal groups' objects used in everyday life and on particular ceremonial occasions, while, on the other hand, it gradually discouraged Aboriginal people from manufacturing objects such as shields and boomerangs only for their own uses, and instead encouraged them to produce objects with the characteristics appealing to the European "audiences". This is why on some objects from that period one can discover a whole range of patterns, e.g. incised hearts, flowers and other non-Aboriginal motifs, obviously incorporated within an Aboriginal functional object, and thus made into an Aboriginal work of art with the intention of exchange or sale.

While Australian cultural policies and institutions of the time that either openly or implicitly acquiesced in the cultural rape and plunder of Aboriginal people were in no way legitimate although legitimized and legally sanctioned, one cannot, however, ignore the fact that Aboriginal people, either by lack of awareness or silence, contributed to the ultimate tragic consequences. There is no doubt that, in some, although probably rather rare cases, Aboriginal people did profit (at least economically) from European interest in their culture. As numerous post-contact experiences suggest, barter or trade normally come into being when two different cultures meet.<sup>4</sup> Whether it is an exchange of native weapons for tobacco or glass beads or for money is irrelevant as long as both parties are satisfied (although the extent of such contracts was often not clarified).

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Aboriginal people have been "on the verge of extinction" for such a long time that it should surprise us that there are any around at present, some still maintaining traditional practices. For a more detailed discussion of the historical discourse that created and propagated this view, see Chapter V in Kovačić, L. (2001) *Cataloguing culture: In search of the origins of written records, material culture and oral histories of the Gamaroi, northern New South Wales*, unpublished PhD thesis, Melbourne, University of Melbourne.

<sup>4</sup> The significance of barter between indigenous people and their colonizers has been discussed at length by Humphrey, C. & Hugh-Jones, S. (1992) Introduction, in: Humphrey, C.

The reason why this has been overlooked by most researchers even today is the fact that the atrocities and massacres committed by European arrivals (both individuals and institutions) towards Aboriginal people greatly superseded such, not so significant (though by no means insignificant) details. In Europe and its colonial territories, the nineteenth century saw a rise of physical anthropology which required "fresh" research material in the form of human skulls, bones, and other osteological items. "Body-snatching" soon became the most brutal (and most lucrative) form of museum "trade". It was a common nineteenth century method of supplying overseas and colonial museums with Aboriginal osteological material, the evidence of which is still palpable in most such institutions.<sup>5</sup>

## New owners, new positions

The Aboriginal collections in Australian federal and state museums can be roughly subdivided into two areas: the so-called traditional objects acquired in the early colonial period, and the objects acquired in the postcolonial era. The former were manufactured before or immediately after colonization, and include boomerangs, clubs, hatchets, shields, spears, children's toys, dilly bags, carved and scarred trees, mourning caps, canoes, etc., as well as the various archaeological material and items given to Aboriginal people by colonial authorities, such as breastplates or gorgets.<sup>6</sup> The lat-

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& Hugh-Jones, S. (eds) *Barter, Exchange and Value: An Anthropological Approach*, pp. 1-20, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. The two-way nature of barter is explained as follows: "Essentially the exchange in barter is determined by the interest which each side has in the object of the other, an interest which is satisfied by the transaction."; *ibid.*, p. 7. In *Politicised values: The cultural dynamics of peripheral exchange*, in: *ibid.*, pp. 21-41, Nicholas Thomas relates the numerous accounts of exchange between the Polynesians, the Inuit and the Pacific Islanders, and the Western new-comers. The transactions were essentially based on inequality: "Here, the indigenous people almost immediately recognise their technological inferiority and form great and insatiable desires for European goods."; *ibid.*, p. 22. In *Yesterday's luxuries, tomorrow's necessities: Business and barter in Northwest Amazonia*, in: *ibid.*, pp. 42-74, Stephen Hugh-Jones shows the impact of European goods on the peoples of Amazonia, and similarly points to the appeal of those goods and their role in the indigenous people's lives: "Western goods provided new and increased opportunities for both technological and symbolic innovation."; *ibid.*, p. 59. In his book *One Blood: 200 Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity: A Story of Hope* (1994), Melbourne, Oxford University Press, p. 240, John Harris briefly mentions "gross exploitation by settlers" spurred by "the temporary delusion held by Aboriginal people that European items were extremely desirable wealth. ...Confronted with what must have seemed unbelievable wealth, there were Aboriginal men who were willing to barter the use of women for European goods."

<sup>5</sup> As discussed by Monaghan, D. (1991) *The body snatchers*, in: *Bulletin*, pp. 30-8, and Turnbull, P. (1991) *Science, National Identity and Aboriginal Body-Snatching in Nineteenth Century Australia*, London, Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, University of London.

<sup>6</sup> Brass breastplates were often given to the Aboriginal people who acted as mediators between colonial authorities and local Aboriginal populations. A typical breastplate contains

ter were obtained from Aboriginal communities in the past fifty-odd years, and usually represent weapons, (children's) drawings and art inspired by traditional designs and methods of manufacture. My research interest lay primarily in identifying the origins and the current status of the first group of objects.

All Aboriginal material also falls into one of the four categories: ethnographic, archaeological, "secret/sacred" and osteological collections. While the first two groups are open to the public, access to the "secret/sacred" and osteological collections is restricted to varying degrees. This division of Aboriginal material into so-called secular (that is, non-restricted) and so-called secret/sacred (and therefore restricted) material has gained prominence in the last decade. The former includes the majority of items used in everyday life, while the latter comprises private and ceremonial objects such as churingas, bullroarers and carved trees.<sup>7</sup>

There are three categories of restricted (including "secret/sacred") objects with regard to who and under what conditions can view them. The first category of objects (e.g. carved trees) can be viewed by Aboriginal people in general as well as by non-Aboriginal people who obtained special permission from the relevant Aboriginal community (including museum staff). The objects falling into the second category (e.g. human skeletal remains) cannot be viewed by anyone except Aboriginal people directly related to them and the relevant museum staff. Finally, the third group of objects consists of items such as churingas which were traditionally accessible only to the selected few (e.g. fully initiated men/women, or "clever men/women"), and there are either no living members of the community to look after such material, or the community has given the right of permanent custody over such material to the museum in question; these objects have been permanently sealed and cannot be viewed by anyone at all, not even by the museum director.

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an inscription "King (or Queen) of [such and such a place]" and the stereotypical images of kangaroo and emu, today official emblems of Australia. Breastplates are discussed as shameful colonial representations of Aboriginality by both scholars and Aboriginal intelligentsia. See, for instance, Cleary, T. (c.1993) *Poignant Regalia: 19th Century Aboriginal Breastplates and Images: A catalogue of Aboriginal breastplates held in public, regional and private collections in New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and the Australian National Territory*, Glebe, NSW, Historic Houses Trust of NSW, and Healy, C. (2001) *Chained to their signs: Remembering breastplates*, in: Creed, B. & Hoorn, J. (eds) *Body Trade: Captivity, Cannibalism and Colonialism in the Pacific*, pp. 24-35, Routledge in association with Pluto Press & University of Otago Press.

<sup>7</sup> Carved trees or dendroglyphs are objects unique to the Aboriginal nations of Wiradjuri and Gamaroi, central and northern New South Wales, and their immediate neighbours. Two types of dendroglyphs are distinguished: teleteglyphs (initiation trees) and taphoglyphs (burial trees). They were used for ceremonial purposes, and constitute a major group of culturally sensitive material in the state museums of south-east Australia. In the case of teleteglyphs, this is owing to the fact that their viewing was originally restricted to fully initiated men, and the breaking of this taboo resulted in a death sentence. Taphoglyphs are considered private items. Dendroglyphs can be viewed only by members of the respective Aboriginal communities or with written permission of their local Aboriginal Land Councils.

State and university museums (Fig. 1) have the largest collections of Aboriginal material, while local Aboriginal galleries and keeping places (Fig. 2) store a limited number of items, either of local origin or manufacture, or (rarely) returned to the local community by one of the state museums. At a local level, an institution such as an astronomical observatory may sometimes unexpectedly house some locally found items (Fig. 3).

The cultural institutions that hold Aboriginal artefacts also include libraries, archives, the National Parks and Wildlife Service (with its separate branches in each state) and various governmental departments. These institutions house newspapers, manuscripts and rare books, photographs, films, audio and video tapes,<sup>8</sup> and archaeological material. The branches of the National Parks and Wildlife Service are also responsible for maintaining and supervising Aboriginal sites and objects in situ. Besides these institutional sources, a significant amount of information can be obtained from (amateur) local historians, anthropologists and linguists as well as from Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs) and Aboriginal individuals. The latter may supply stories and oral histories, and give one permission to access significant sites and restricted material in state and local museums, and to obtain family genealogies.<sup>9</sup>

The Sound and Pictorial Collections at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra store audio-tapes and photographs, the latter of which were taken in the second half of the nineteenth century, but without sufficient (if any) details about the people they document and the exact date when they were taken. I have encountered the same situation at the New South Wales State Archives in Sydney. It is a distressing experience to flip over one microform photograph after another showing rows of Aboriginal people without personal names and cultural association as well as a number of governmental missions and reserves that contributed to this cultural dispossession. The obvious lack of attribution of photographs is also present in the Pictorial Collection at the National Library of Australia in Canberra.

State museums store skeletal remains of different Aboriginal groups, primarily with the aim of determining their background, that is, the geographical area and language association, age and conditions of the deceased reflecting the climatic, economic and other conditions of life in the area, and so on. The South Australian Museum Human Biology Division stores a considerable amount of this material.

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<sup>8</sup> The video production, although of a recent date, is nevertheless an invaluable source of information, as old Aboriginal people die and there is often no one to preserve and pass on their cultural heritage. In 1999, for instance, the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service produced a documentary *Inard Oongali: Women's Journey*, the first comprehensive video on Gamaroi "women's business", featuring seven senior Gamaroi women. One of the women died several months after its release.

<sup>9</sup> The copies of the genealogies thus obtained were then sent to the people who gave me permission to view them in the first place. Other material found its way into my PhD thesis, to be used as source of reference for the communities.

The Australian Museum in Sydney stores some osteological items. The Queensland Museum has de-accessioned most of its skeletal material and repatriated it back to the communities for reburial. I did not have the opportunity to view any of this material, nor was I enthusiastic to do so. Like so called secret/sacred material, osteological material is regularly restricted in access and can be viewed only by blood-relations and the representatives of the Aboriginal community in question.

The majority of these collections, however, suffer from the same disadvantage: even where the artefacts are coming from a certain region, they are of uncertain language affiliation. This reflects the random processes of selection behind the creation of early collections responsible for the classification labels which often indicate only a wider geographical location as the provenance of the objects.

Let us now deal in a more systematic way with the basic issues which confront anyone interested in Aboriginal material in Australian cultural institutions: the acquisition of artefacts; the classification and documentation of artefacts; the storage of artefacts; and the museum policies on Aboriginal material in their collections.

## Acquisition of Artefacts

The primary objective of Australian museums, as that of any other, was to preserve Australian Aboriginal and other material objects from destruction by time, weather and "unprofessional" handling. Besides this, Australian museums also had another aim: to gather as much cultural material and as representative as possible of different origin, manufacture and, to a lesser extent, significance for the original owners, in order to create a coherent museum collection. It seems, however, that, evaluating what has been left of the original collections, Australian museums have failed in both objectives.

Firstly, the issue of preservation is today (especially in case of indigenous knowledges and cultures) a contested ground on which indigenous claims play a significant role and point to important questions, such as these: Can we call "preservation" what from today's perspective seems to have been ruthless plunder and dispossession by individuals and institutions? For instance, can (and do) the carved trees removed from the sacred Gamaroi and Wiradjuri initiation grounds in any way represent the culture that is non-existent today? Devoid of their cultural context and geographical location, can they ever be seen by either Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal audiences as monuments surviving time and destruction by weather? What about the destruction inherent in the very act of their removal? This is not to mention the shameful flipping of a coin which determined the fate of some of these trees regarding their future storage under the auspices of two state museums (the then National Museum of Victoria in Melbourne and the South Australian Museum in Adelaide).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For more detail, see below.

The acquisition of Aboriginal artefacts in the early days of museums depended largely on curators' knowledge and skills, not only about the material but also about the ways in which to acquire it. As the first curators of Australian museums regularly lacked both (some of them being completely untrained in anthropology or related disciplines, a trend which continued well into the twentieth century), it would have seemed quite a miracle that Australian museums are still reputed for their Aboriginal collections had it not been for the three directors in the last decade of the nineteenth and the first three decades of the twentieth century: Sir Edward Stirling (South Australian Museum, Adelaide; 1889-1913, an honorary ethnologist 1914-1919), Robert Etheridge, Jr. (Australian Museum, Sydney; 1895-1920, pioneering work 1889-1918) and Sir W. Baldwin Spencer (Museum of Victoria, Melbourne; 1899-1928, a trustee 1895-1899).

These directors introduced far-reaching changes in museums' policies and during their era the museums under their supervision reached an amazing increase in the acquisition of Aboriginal artefacts. They also worked diligently, not only on supplying their collections with items acquired in Australia, but exchanged them with overseas museums and purchased items at international exhibitions. Many irreplaceable Aboriginal artefacts were thus shipped overseas and lost to Australia.<sup>11</sup>

Prior to this period, Australian museums suffered a low rate of acquisitions, especially so before 1853 through to 1860 and from 1860 to 1874, which reflected an overall lack of awareness and non-recognition of Aboriginal culture in Australia's newly established colonies. Museums faced an important political issue in their search for Aboriginal objects and were seriously disadvantaged by the fact that early settlers' practices more often than not conflicted with those directed towards the preservation of Aboriginal heritage: authentic Aboriginal objects were increasingly more difficult to find under the surveillance of Aborigines-hostile settlers and pastoralists.

The 342 Aboriginal specimens acquired by the Australian Museum and stored in the Garden Palace in Sydney after the 1879 International Exhibition caught fire in 1882, thus forever erasing a valuable source of knowledge for the generations to come. Within the next five years, the Museum's curator Dr E.P. Ramsey would more than triple the number of ethnological artefacts (including non-Australian) that originally existed in the collection. No attempts had been made, however, to create a museum catalogue which would list the inventory of state museums, except for Sir Baldwin Spencer's catalogue of the National Museum of Victoria (1901-1922), of which I have been able to consult only the 1918 and 1922 editions.

To sum up, the earlier acquisitions had been affected by the following issues: 1 an overall unawareness and non-recognition of Aboriginal culture(s); 2 conflicting

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<sup>11</sup> cf. McCarthy, F.D. (1982) *Anthropology in the museums of Australia*, in: McCall, G. (ed.) *Anthropology in Australia: Essays to Honour 50 Years of "Mankind"*, Sydney, Anthropological Society of NSW, pp. 24-5.



interests: curators vs settlers and pastoralists; 3 untrained curators and museum staff; and 4 non-existence of (appropriate) museum catalogues and inventory lists.

A noticeable exception to the collecting passion of museum curators were objects made and used by Aboriginal women and children who are clearly underrepresented in the collections. The main reason is the fact that the museum staff were male, Anglo-Saxon "experts" who saw nothing special or valuable in "women's business", even when they were allowed by Aboriginal people to observe the more everyday aspects of it. As Anderson and Reeves observed: "The absence of women from departments of ethnography has had long-term implications for the gender balance of Aboriginal collections. A recent survey of the Aboriginal collections of the major state and federal museums revealed that between 75% and 80% of all objects relate to the material culture of men rather than of women."<sup>12</sup>

The artefacts in today's museums' possession have been acquired in several different ways: a) on so-called "museum expeditions", gathered by the museum staff; b) by purchase, mainly from individual collectors and, to a lesser extent, from auctions; c) by exchange; d) by donation; e) unknown.

a) The term "museum expedition"<sup>13</sup>, refers to the museum staff visit to an area of, in this case, anthropological interest, and acquiring specimens from either an individual or a group of people or simply taking (sometimes literally uprooting) items considered to be valuable to science, some of which would otherwise soon perish due to age, atmospheric conditions and, only recently recognized, vandalism. In the past, this decision often rested with only an "anthropologist" or two. With the exception of most recent acquisitions, I have not encountered a single documented example of the museum staff consulting and obtaining consent of the concerned local groups or individuals prior to (or even after) the removal of either "profane" or "sacred" objects from the locality of their manufacture/existence.

In the case of Gamaroi material, the "museum expeditions" refer to the early 20th century expeditions undertaken by Robert Etheridge, Jr. and Edmund O. Milne, both curators of the Australian Museum, who supplied the Museum with some eighty carved trees by visiting old initiation and burial grounds in north central New South Wales.

The 1938-39 Harvard-Adelaide Expedition, conducted by Norman B. Tindale and Joseph B. Birdsell and documented by Tindale in his *Journal*,<sup>14</sup> cut across south, southeast and northeast Australia. During the expedition, valuable

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<sup>12</sup> Anderson, M. & Reeves, A. (1994) *Contested identities: Museums and the nation in Australia*, in: Kaplan, F. (ed.) *Museums and the Making of 'Ourselves': The Role of Objects in National Identity*, London & New York, Leicester University Press, p. 108.

<sup>13</sup> As employed in the computer listing of Gamaroi artefacts at the Museum of Victoria, July 1997.

<sup>14</sup> Tindale, N. B. [1938-39] *The Harvard-Adelaide Universities Anthropological Expedition, Australia, 1938-39: Journal and Notes*, MS 1, pp. 1-758, Adelaide, Division of Ethnography, South Australian Museum.

archaeological material was collected, including millstones, choppers, hammerstones, hatchet heads, adze flakes, scrapers, cylcons, shells used as food and other stone implements from north central New South Wales. Among the wealth of non-archaeological material, a water-craft (canoe) from the Macintyre River and seven canoe-wedges from Boggabilla, also on the Macintyre River, were obtained. A large number of genealogies were also collected.

In 1949 a joint "museum expedition" visited the Collymongle Bora (Gamaroi male initiation) grounds near Collarenebri, led by Norman B. Tindale of the South Australian Museum (Adelaide) and Donald Tugby of the National Museum (Melbourne) and "inspired" by Lindsay Black of the town of Leeton, NSW. These men cut down fifty-two carved trees and, after dividing them into two lots by flicking a coin, transported them to the state museums in Adelaide and Melbourne.<sup>15</sup> The Museum of Victoria Ethnographic Catalogue<sup>16</sup> lists twenty-three of these trees as having been collected by Lindsay Black, the collection date unknown. The accession date of 31 January 1950, however, points to the 1949 "museum expedition". Freda Young's article<sup>17</sup> on the removal of carved trees from the Collymongle Bora grounds states that there were fifty-two trees removed, of which twenty-five were sent to each of the two state museums and the remaining two to the Queensland Museum in Brisbane. It appears, however, that the Queensland Museum does not hold any carved trees from that location. What has happened to them and the other two from the Museum of Victoria? Have they been classified incorrectly, sent unregistered to (an)other museum/s which still keep them, destroyed in the process of adjustment to a new environment or due to handling, or did the author of this article present to the public an inconsistent or even wrong piece of information? I have not been able to find answers to any of these questions.

- b) Some museum items have been purchased from individual, independent dealers, including travellers. Again, there is no evidence to support what today can be only conjectures: Were these items exchanged for material goods, bought for money, stolen, or simply given by people who maybe recognized in pale-skinned people the spirits of their ancestors or simply well-intentioned passers-by (sometimes in quest of knowledge and/or a material proof of its existence), willing or even alert to hear Aboriginal stories? It is highly probable that they were obtained in all of these ways, depending on people and circumstances. The naturalist Charles Daley appears to be one of the few independent "professional" collectors of New South Wales items, in the sense that he probably made his living out of supplying museums with Aboriginal artefacts. The Australian Museum is the only institution which has a written record of purchase at auctions, all of a recent date.

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<sup>15</sup> A part of the proceedings was documented visually by H.R. Balfour (National Museum, Melbourne). A copy of the film existing at the South Australian Museum has, according to an officer at that museum, been sent to a local Aboriginal organisation in New South Wales.

<sup>16</sup> Computer print-out, July 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Young, F. (1949) Scientists save sacred trees..., *Australian Women's Weekly*, [pp. 20-1].

- c) There is no special record of Australian museums exchanging particular items with other Australian or overseas museums, except for the Australian Museum, Sydney. A glimpse at overseas museums' lists of artefacts from Australia reveals, however, that a huge number of Aboriginal objects must have been either exchanged for other items from overseas museums' collections, or sold to the latter.<sup>18</sup>

In a few instances, it is clear that there has been some form of exchange or transaction between some Australian museums, since items that were at some point in time listed as part of the inventory of one museum or institution suddenly appear not to be there any more, but at a different location. Such is the case with the two carved trees which were first deposited at the Australian Institute of Anatomy in Canberra, from which they were later transferred to one of the museums. Sometimes it is difficult to trace the inter-museum movements of some items.

- d) Donated items came from the private collections of individual people, who later decided to give them to museums without any costs or prices involved. Often these were members of the museum staff, usually curators or researchers. Sometimes donations were made by missionaries or travellers as well as by station owners and local people.

Sir William Macleay's collections (which included natural history specimens as well as Australian anthropological and archaeological material) were formed in the 1860s and the 1870s, and were subsequently bequeathed by Macleay to what is now known as the Macleay Museum at the University of Sydney.

- e) For a number of artefacts the current curators are unable to determine acquisition details, that is, the name of the person/institution from whom or which they had been originally acquired or the date of the transaction. These bear the label "unknown" for these designations.

There are several reasons for this: the lack of adequate training, knowledge and skills of previous curators; insufficient information on and documentation of objects at the time of their acquisition; and finally, one should search for reasons outside museum institutions, related to who and how originally obtained these objects. As I already pointed out, today it is next to impossible to track down all the factors and links in the chain of the shaping of today's museums' collections.

The South Australian Museum Archaeological Collection Database neatly lists how and from whom the artefacts were acquired, although in some cases without the year of the transactions. The three volumes of the guide to the main Aboriginal collection, however, regularly lack significant acquisition details, except for the artefacts obtained during Tindale and Birdsell's 1938-39 Harvard-Adelaide Expedition.

The National Museum of Australia (Canberra) has a well-documented database of Aboriginal objects coming from New South Wales. The only drawback of this Museum's computer catalogue system, in my opinion, is the absence of an acquisition date for all but the few artefacts.

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<sup>18</sup> cf. Cooper, op.cit.