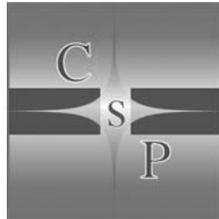


Encounters | Materialities | Confrontations
Archaeologies of Social Space and Interaction

Edited by

Per Cornell and Fredrik Fahlander



CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PRESS

Encounters | Materialities | Confrontations: Archaeologies of Social Space and Interaction, edited by Per Cornell and Fredrik Fahlander

This book first published 2007 by

Cambridge Scholars Press

15 Angerton Gardens, Newcastle, NE5 2JA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN 1-84718-085-X

CHAPTER THREE

MATERIALITY, ‘AMBIGUITY’ AND THE UNFAMILIAR IN THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF INTER-SOCIETAL CONFRONTATIONS: A CASE STUDY FROM NORTHWEST AUSTRALIA

RODNEY HARRISON

While many culture contact studies in archaeology have been framed by acculturation theory, which calls for the delineation of distinct material culture forms and correlations, this paper argues instead that the texture of agency and the contact experience can be better understood through a study of particular, ‘unfamiliar’ or ‘idiosyncratic’ artefacts and events which may better frame the ambiguity of both short and long term culture contacts in settler societies. This idea is developed with reference to a case study in contact archaeology from Old Lamboo in the southeast Kimberley region of northwest Australia, where Aboriginal labourers and white pastoral managers and their families experienced prolonged culture contacts throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Prelude: southeast Kimberley July 1998

It was late in the afternoon and our shadows were long as we walked across the plain on Old Lamboo station which Jaru people call *Bindiri* (Figure 1). We had been surveying the remains of the former cattle ranching station with a group of elderly Aboriginal pastoral workers who had formed the principle labour force on this property during the twentieth century (Figures 2-4). As we finished for the day and began the walk back to our 4WD vehicle, I was surprised to almost trip over a series of telegraph insulators which had been flaked and were sitting in a scatter of material in the centre of the remains of the former Aboriginal pastoral labourer’s encampment on the site. These porcelain insulators are a

ubiquitous part of the archaeology of the overland telegraph line in Australia, which pushed through my study area in the late nineteenth century. I was not surprised to encounter flaked artefacts, indeed, Aboriginal people at Lamboo had continued to manufacture stone artefacts well into the 1950s (see also Harrison 2002a, 2004), and the archaeology of the worker's camp is characterised by tens of thousands of flaked stone and bottle glass artefacts.

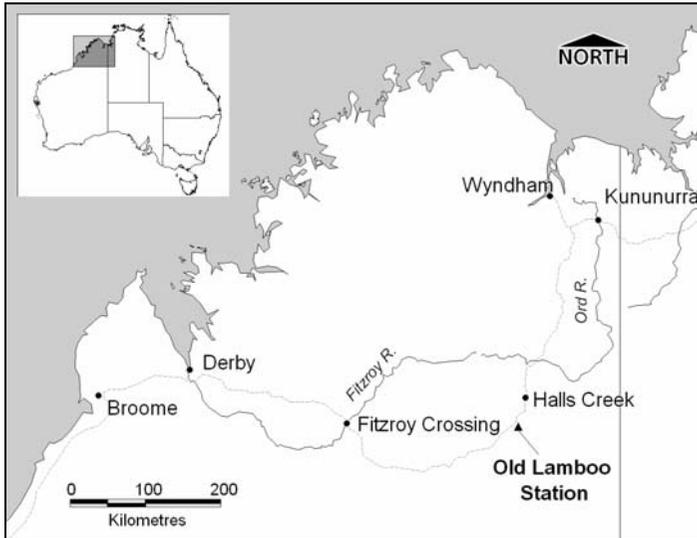


Figure 1: Map showing location of Old Lamboo Station, southeast Kimberley, Western Australia.

While I was aware of the many accounts written by early ethnographers and observers of Aboriginal culture of Aboriginal people breaking down telegraph insulators for the manufacture of flaked tools (see Harrison 2000), I also knew that this activity had been outlawed, and that Aboriginal people found in possession of tools made from insulators had been threatened with imprisonment, or worse. Given the presence of a stone quarry with extremely fine grained and highly prized chert less than 1km from the station (and indeed, the ease of obtaining bottle glass for the same purpose from the station), it seemed extremely improbable to me that any person in their right mind would risk imprisonment or death simply for the sake of a small flake of porcelain. On careful inspection, the insulators appeared to be smashed rather than flaked *per se*, and none of the large primary flakes which had been knapped from the insulators had been removed. The pieces formed three broken and flaked

insulators, left in the middle of what appeared to be a family camp within 200 metres and clear sight of the pastoral homestead in which the white manager, who would surely have been in a position to report this to police, lived. There could be no purely functional interpretation of these artefacts. I felt that this had to be read as a gesture of active rebellion or resistance, as there was no other way of making sense of them. Given the other archaeological evidence which pointed to the widespread adoption of 'European' items of material culture and integration into settler modes of existence by Aboriginal pastoral labourers (Harrison 2004), such evidence of active resistance formed a messy inconsistency which troubled me whenever I thought of it over the months of fieldwork that followed.

In this paper I would like to interrogate these artefacts further in terms of what they might have to say about the ambiguous and highly charged nature of inter-societal confrontations, even those characterised by what appears to be a high degree of peaceful integration. In this sense I hope that the paper will have some broader relevance to studies of inter-societal contacts in other times and places, but being closer to our recent past, allow textures of understanding drawn from oral and documentary accounts which might otherwise be lost in their absence.

The contact history of the southeast Kimberley

The Kimberley region represented one of the last frontiers for European exploration, colonisation and settlement of Australia, and indeed, the world. As recently as 1870, there had been no successful British settlement in the Australia's far northwest. Even today the region remains extremely remote from the centres of settlement, which cluster around the coast and focus on the southeast of the continent.

Following the expeditions of Alexander Forrest in 1879, southern and eastern pastoralists and prospectors were drawn in numbers to the Kimberley as a result of Forrest's exaggerated praise of the area as grazing land. A number of leases were taken up during or shortly after 1881, predominantly (though not exclusively) by large corporate interests (Buchanan 1934: 98). The first east Kimberley homestead to be founded and stocked was the Ord River Station in 1884 (Clement and Bridge 1991: xi). These events represent the earliest significant inland presence of Europeans in the east Kimberley. The numbers of settlers increased even more significantly with an influx of European and Chinese prospectors after 1885 when Hall and Slatterley discovered gold at Halls Creek. By the 1890s much of the alluvial gold had been worked out, and most of the itinerant prospectors had moved on to the far more profitable goldfields around Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie further south in Western Australia.

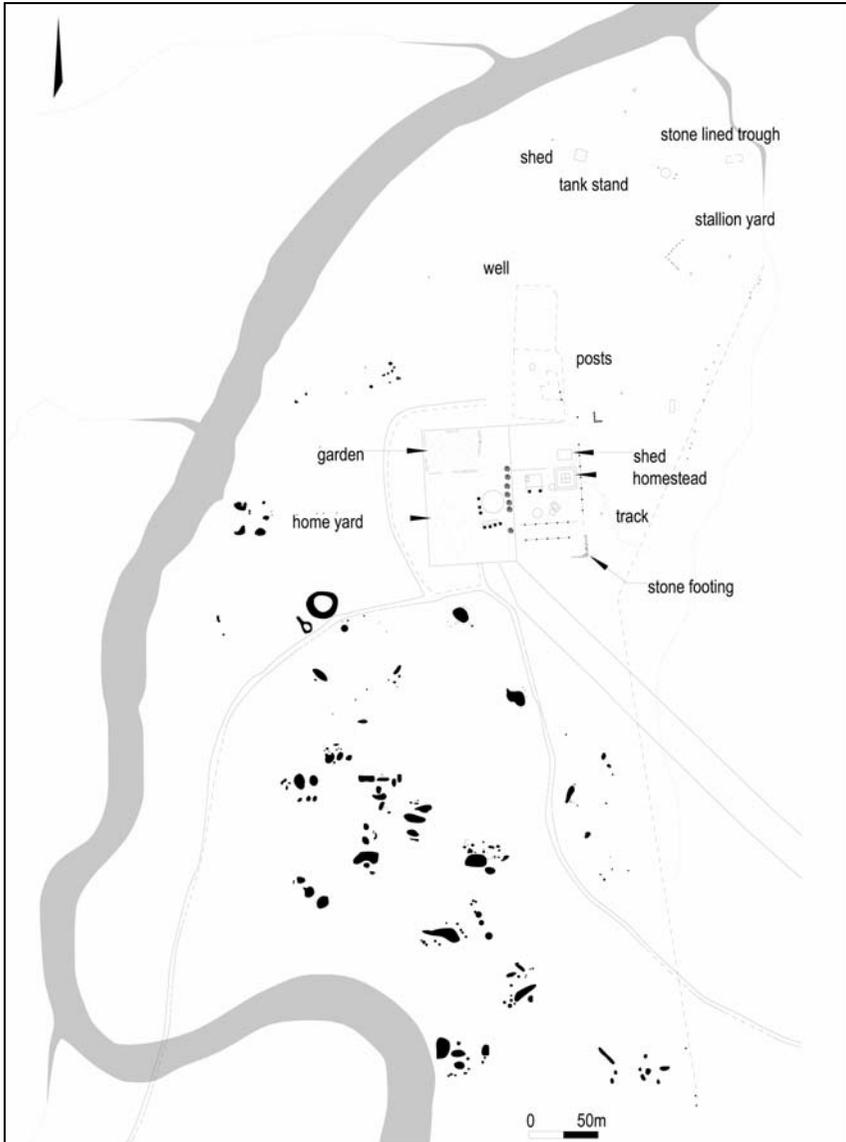


Figure 2: Site plan showing principle archaeological features of Old Lamboo homestead and associated hearths and artefact scatters representing the remains of the Aboriginal pastoral worker's encampment.

Killing times

There are a number of published oral accounts of massacres from this early period, many of them allegedly reprisals for cattle spearing or retribution for the killing of Europeans which were led or instigated by early pastoralists and officially sanctioned by the police force (e.g. see Nunkiarry 1996a, Nunkiarry 1996b, Lanigan 1996). Initially Aboriginal groups responded to these attacks with militancy, and a number of Aboriginal resistance leaders appeared. In the west Kimberley in the late 1880s and 1890s, the exploits of the Aboriginal resistance fighter 'Pigeon' were widely reported in the media. He avoided concerted attempts by several police patrols to apprehend him, surprising, raiding and wounding several Europeans and their Aboriginal assistants over a period of five years (Green 1995: 33-52).



Figure 3: View across the Aboriginal pastoral worker's encampment towards Old Lamboo Homestead buildings during archaeological investigations in 1998.

The hunt for Pigeon and his associates was bloody and violent, and possibly hundreds of Aboriginal people were killed in the areas around Derby, Fitzroy Crossing, and the Margaret River. As recently as 1926 in the Forrest River area near Wyndham, a group of police and assistants shot indiscriminately at Aboriginal people who they met during the search for Lumbulumbia, an

Aboriginal man who had speared a white pastoralist called Hay in retaliation for Hay's molesting his wife (Green 1995).

Station times

By 1920 much of the east Kimberley had been taken up for pastoral lease. A major shift in attitudes of white pastoralists towards local Aboriginal people occurred during the first half of the 20th century as their potential as a labour force for pastoral work became apparent. Aboriginal people began to be actively sought out by pastoralists and rationed in return for taking part in station duties. The shift in pacification of Aboriginal people through forced 'dispersal' to rationing is one of the most important changes in the history of indigenous-settler relations in the north of Australia. A number of changes contributed to this process, particularly the 'quietening down' of local Aboriginal resisters by violence, and the geographical expansion and increased intensity of grazing in the pastoral industry which led to escalating contacts between settler pastoralists and indigenous people. The need for indigenous labour was accelerated by the departure of many European stockmen during the Second World War (Shaw 1986: 9).

This 'coming in' was an erratic process, which occurred at different times over varying periods, and to different degrees for Aboriginal people in this area. Although some people had began camping on the margins of the earliest pastoral stations by the turn of the twentieth century, some Aboriginal people resisted European settlements until the 1950s or 1960s, particularly Wangkajunga, Kukatja and Walmajarri people living in the extreme south of the region (Kimberley Language Resource Centre 1996). Indeed, several Aboriginal people from Halls Creek told me that they recalled their own first experience of contact with Europeans as children in the 1930s.

Coinciding with the change in attitude of white pastoralists was the desire among many Aboriginal people in the east Kimberley to 'come in' and seek work and rations on pastoral stations. Contact is the natural outcome of meeting of groups of people who inhabit the same time and place. However the reasons why Aboriginal people chose to make continued contact with European station owners and allowed this contact to develop into a sustained relationship of interaction is not immediately apparent and deserves some consideration (after Kelly 1997: 352). Aboriginal oral accounts, both published and recorded by the author, suggest a number of reasons for 'coming in' to pastoral stations in the southeast Kimberley, including a preference for European foodstuffs, a taste for stimulants such as tea and tobacco, and the need for security. As Stan Brumby noted:

We left our home in the south and grew up at Lamboo then. We never saw our home again...The old people said, 'You can't go back south to live'. There were white men with guns, early days white men going around then (Brumby 1996: 67).

Other reasons cited include the desire to be with kin who had already moved onto stations and that people were 'rounded up' by Europeans and forcibly brought in. While there is no single answer as to why Aboriginal people in the east Kimberley chose to start living and working on pastoral stations, the interaction of Aboriginal people with European pastoralists must be understood as situated within a network of cultural strategies that were dictated by personal as well as group needs and desires.

Award wages and the end of station work

It was not until after the Second World War that Aboriginal people began to be paid monetary wages. By the 1960s there were calls for equal wages for Aboriginal and white pastoral station workers, triggered by a number of developments including the 1967 National Referendum that officially included Aboriginal people in the census. The consequence of the new pastoral industry award for Aboriginal workers of 1968 was that many Aboriginal people were forced off stations and into the fringes of towns, as pastoralists were unable, or unwilling, to pay the new award wages to their Aboriginal workers and families. In Halls Creek, the indigenous population of the town rose from 200 to 600 people in a matter of days and the town required emergency airlifts of flour to cope with the sudden increase in population (*The West Australian Newspaper*, 27/2/69). While some Aboriginal people returned to pastoral labour under the new cash economy, there was no longer a place for the large community encampments which had formed the social nexus of Aboriginal pastoralism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For this reason, many older Aboriginal people look back on the period before the Referendum as a 'Golden Age' of Indigenous-settler relations, and a time when they held a valued place within the social and economic world of settler Australia.

Lamboo Pastoral Station: A case study in the archaeology of cross-cultural interactions in northwest Australia

My case study location of Lamboo Station in many ways typifies these broader themes (Figures 1-4). It was first leased as a pastoral property in 1901 and Ruby Plains pastoral station, a neighbour to Lamboo, had been stocked with cattle as early as 1889. A series of massacres connected with late nineteenth century gold mining activities in the area had already occurred when Booty begun to build his

first homestead buildings at Old Lamboo around 1903. Many of these killings were not officially reported or recorded, mention of them surviving only ‘accidentally’ in the documentary record, and in the oral accounts of the ancestors of Aboriginal people and settlers from the area. Oral accounts of a massacre at Hangman’s Creek, also known to Jaru people as *Rawungga*, discuss the hanging and shooting murders of many Aboriginal people by Police Sergeant Pilmer. Pilmer reputedly had Aboriginal people assist him in digging a ‘well’ before hanging and shooting them and using the hole as a grave.

White man called Pilmer, he come down from Sydney. I don’t know how much people, might be 40 or 60 or more 100 hundred people get hanged. Kid bin get knocked by tree, little kid, small kid, smackem into the tree. Kid. That’s the old people bin tellin me. My granpa, my uncle, and my father. Nother father, not my own father, but my stepfather, bin tellin me kid bin smashed in the tree, right there. They had a big hole, they bin digging a big hole, right there, and bury them right there when they bin get hanged. That’s the story from old people bin tell me, and I very sorry for that place, the tree gone now, but I got a photo here, I gottem in language centre, and I gottem in the camp. We got a photo of that tree, hangman tree, in the Hangman Creek...That’s the story, I put my story. Gardiya called Pilmer bin killem my people. Pilmer. That’s the Captain Cook, he only bin sendem all the crook. Some crook bin go to Northern Territory, I don’t know what man bin go. Northern Territory, Queensland. Shoot, kill all the people, blackfella. Tried to killem, but people bin run away, in the rock country, couldn’t gettem, even my mother, even my uncle, even my granny, bin running to big rock country, stay there, till new lot of good gardiya, bin come now, white man, good white man, put up station now, and put up town, Halls Creek (Stan Brumby, 1999, Figure 5).

Other murders that occurred along the Mary River are also attributed to Pilmer and Booty (see over), although Pilmer’s involvement in massacres in other areas of the Kimberley (Pilmer 1998; Green 1995) have tended to allow him to develop into an archetype, and the direct link between these historical characters and the massacres is uncertain (see version of this massacre in Nunkiarri 1996a, 1996b which attributes them to Booty).

‘Booty time’: 1901-1930s

Frederick Charles Booty, an Oxford graduate and nephew of Osmond, owner of Ord River station (Durack 1959: 386), was the first European to take up land for pastoral lease in my study area. He took up 64,000 acres of grazing land under the name ‘Lamboo’. After acquiring the original pastoral lease in 1901, Booty sought progressively to acquire further leases to the south and north of the station. One of Booty’s first actions in this regard was to consolidate the eight

original leases into two contiguous ones in 1918. The station was run by F.C. Booty and his son Oliver Booty for over thirty years.

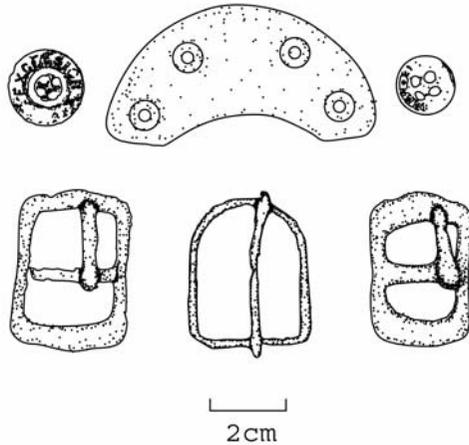


Figure 4: Artefacts associated with 'European' items of clothing from the Aboriginal pastoral worker's encampment at Old Lamboo. Top row l-r: 'Excelsior' trouser button; metal boot plate; metal shirt button. Bottom row l-r: manufactured belt buckle; 'home made' belt buckle made from horse harness buckle with piece of wire wound around it; manufactured belt buckle.

Although none of Booty's personal papers have been able to be located, the papers of Robert Button, manager of adjacent Ruby Plains pastoral station, provide insights into life on Lamboo during the period up until 1911. The connections between Button and Lamboo are intimate, as Button's first son to his de facto wife 'Jinnie', George, came to work for Booty on Lamboo, and is a relative to several of the Aboriginal people with whom I collaborated on this project. Little is recorded about Jinnie in Button's papers, although it appears that she was a local Aboriginal woman with whom he lived for much of his adult life. Together they had five children, three of whom were sent to Beagle Bay mission on Button's death in 1911 (Gibbin nd). The lack of detail of their relationship most likely reflects the pervasive discomfort (and with the passing of the *Aborigines Act 1905*, the illegality) of many non-Aboriginal Australians at this time with casual or long-term relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people (see discussion in Choo 2001). Despite this, their relationship appears to have been a relatively happy and long-term one, which belies the stereotypes of an entirely violent racial frontier in the Kimberley at the turn of the century. Button utilised local Aboriginal labour in construction works at Ruby Plains, and established a rationing relationship with Aboriginal people

early into the establishment of the station. In 1898 he writes that he used Aboriginal labour to build fences and dig trenches to make a stockyard, paying them with an old bullock.

There is always a Mob of blacks camped here and they get a good feed of bones every time that I kill...the blacks are very good to me. They never go about where cattle run and never steal anything from me. They like me and think I am a big boss. I never interfere with them, they can come and go as they like and if I want any work do any little jobs. I always give them some tobacco which they prize very much (Robert Button 1898 quoted in Gibbin nd: 10).

Button also employed Aboriginal people in domestic roles at the station, mentioning specifically that his cook was a local Aboriginal person. He discusses the use of Aboriginal ‘boys’ for mustering work, commenting on their enthusiasm for the work. In addition to using Aboriginal people for labour, ‘officially’ rationing Aboriginal people gave the station a regular income, which was a financial benefit given the amount of speculation required in setting up and running a large pastoral interest. This was particularly the case after the *Stock Diseases Act 1896* was implemented, which restricted the movement of cattle throughout the Kimberley region due to the risks associated with tick infestation, and made getting cattle to market for sale at Wyndham increasingly expensive in time and labour, as well as logistically difficult.

The government allows all stations about here one shilling per day to feed any cripples, or any old men and women that can not hunt for their tucker, but the Government magistrate has to see them first and order you to feed them. I am feeding two, one very old man, the other a crippled little girl, having a small bone broken in her left leg (Robert Button 1898 quoted in Gibbin nd: 10).

Both Bob Button and F.C. Booty are implicated in a number of local oral accounts of massacres of Aboriginal people, despite their reliance on local Aboriginal labourers to run their properties. In a twist on the pioneering theme of European histories of pastoralism in the northwest, George Nunkiarry relates simply ‘Booty shot a lot of people there, and then he went west and built the station at Lamboo’ (Nunkiarry 1996a: 42). Booty recounts that ‘Kimberley in the early eighties and nineties was a wild country and contained wild men’ (Buchanan 1933: 198). The logic of these actions today are almost taken for granted, and Jaru and Kija people often use euphemisms for killings by early pastoralists and miners such as ‘quietening down’ or ‘settling down’. There are a number of accounts from this period not only of the massacre of ‘wild’ or ‘bush’ Aborigines, but also of Aboriginal pastoral labourers. Several of these oral stories have recently been published as part of a collection titled *Moola Bulla: in the shadow of the mountain*, published by the Kimberley Language

Resource Centre and Magabala Books. What these stories indicate is that these massacres were not so much about what we would traditionally think of as frontier warfare, but about the murder of Aboriginal ‘insiders’ and pastoral labourers as much as they were about the murder of ‘Others’ or about retribution killing. These stories are chilling because they indicate that despite the widespread integration of Aboriginal people into the pastoral labour force, their lives were still at risk from the very white people who employed them. These massacres appear to have occurred in the area well into the 1920s and 1930s.



Figure 5: Stan Brumby at the site of the Hangman’s creek massacre at *Rawungga* in 1999.

The archaeology of integration into the pastoral labour force

While I do not have space to go into detail here, elsewhere (Harrison 2002c) I have argued that the archaeology of the Aboriginal encampments at Old Lamboo can be read as demonstrating the ways in which Aboriginal pastoral labourers and non-Aboriginal pastoralists developed shared understandings of landscapes and ways of relating to one another. Further, I argued that Aboriginal pastoral labourers developed for themselves a new sense of collective identity which was distinct from other Aboriginal people who were not a part of the pastoral labour force in the southeast Kimberley (see Harrison 2004). If we were

to take a ‘traditional’ archaeological approach to culture contact in this case, the archaeological evidence could very easily be read as demonstrating widespread integration of Aboriginal people into the (white) pastoral economy. The adoption of many items of clothing and material culture (Figure 4) along with the adaptation of items of material culture from white society would, under a traditional ‘acculturation’ model, suggest that this was the case. However, there are hints in the archaeology and oral record that the situation was far more ambiguous; a certain fuzziness exists at the margins of our archaeological vision which suggests the need for a closer look. I think the find of the flaked insulator might hold a key to understanding the nature of this ambiguity, and demonstrate something which is more broadly relevant to other studies of cross-cultural encounters in other times and places.

Multiple overlapping contact zones: Archaeological ambiguity and reconciling the massacre of the pastoral labour force

Where most contact studies and archaeologies of colonialism have assumed a single, clear-cut duality between colonisers and Indigenes, in the case of Old Lamboo, it is perhaps more informative to think of a series of multiple, overlapping liminal contact zones (Figure 6). Mary-Louise Pratt (1992: 6) uses this term, in opposition to the term ‘frontier’, which historically has been grounded within a Euro-American imperial expansionist perspective, to describe:

...the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separate come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations...[the term] invoke[s] the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect...the term “contact”...foreground[s] the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters...[to emphasise] copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power.

Spatial patterning in the surface archaeological remains at Old Lamboo demonstrates a clear distinction between the material world of Aboriginal pastoral labourers, and their kin who lived and operated outside of the influence of the station. Contemporary Aboriginal camp sites in the ‘bush’, away from the pastoral station, contain a very different range of artefact types from those at Old Lamboo (see Harrison 2004). The distinction between white pastoral workers and their Aboriginal workmates and families who lived on the station is much less clear. Elsewhere I have suggested that the material worlds of white and black pastoralists increasingly merged over time, such that by the mid

twentieth century at Old Lamboo, Aboriginal workers and their families to a large extent shared the social and cultural space of the pastoral homestead with their white colleagues (see Harrison 2004). Far from the centres of colonialism on the northern Australian frontier, the lives of black and white pastoralists must have seemed to be merging and even creolising in a way which I am sure may have alarmed white colonists. However, even if not represented in the archaeological record, we know from oral and documentary accounts that white privilege and domination was expressed through acts of sporadic violence and control, such as the massacres described above. Aboriginal pastoralists, whilst assuming a material culture which appeared to show a high degree of social integration into the pastoral labour force, were also keen to express their own difference, both from Aboriginal 'outsiders', and from their white workmates, through acts of rebellion such as the one represented by the broken insulator. Where some such gestures of resistance might be read as mimetic or ironic in nature (eg Harrison 2003), in this instance, the broken insulator represents a clear rebellion against white authority and rule within the pastoral domain.

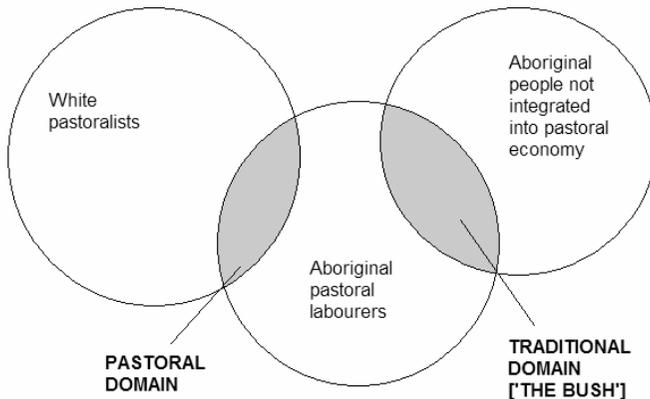


Figure 6: Diagram showing multiple overlapping liminal contact zones at Old Lamboo.

The documentary and oral accounts of the massacres of Aboriginal pastoral labourers by station managers are difficult to understand. From a purely economic point of view, the massacre of the very people on whom the livelihood of the 'typical' late nineteenth or early twentieth century northern Australian pastoralist depended makes absolutely no sense. I think the accounts of these massacres, and the act of rebellion represented by the flaked or smashed

telegraph insulators left in plain sight of the white pastoral manager's house, demonstrate something profound about the ambiguities and stresses which are a part of inter-societal interactions, even those that demonstrate a high degree of integration and interdependence. Despite the appearances of high levels of integration, daily life in this system depended largely on the ability of white pastoral managers to maintain a position of power over their Aboriginal labourers. Given that most white station managers would, during the first part of the twentieth century have been outnumbered by at least 1 to 200 by Aboriginal people, such a position must have felt incredibly tenuous. Acts of resistance by labourers, even minor acts of resistance, must have felt like an enormous threat to authority and power held so tenuously. What I want to suggest here is that even where the material record indicates a high degree of integration and peaceful co-existence, paranoia and stress also co-exist as a necessary condition of the culture contact experience, and may bubble up into instances of extreme violence and bloodshed. To read the archaeological record of material integration as one of peaceful co-existence in such culture contact situations would be giving us a very once sided perspective of life under such colonial regimes.

Apparently dichotomous examples of cross-cultural contacts may in fact generate complex, contextually dictated instances of multiple social identities which make the clear structural distinction between colonisers and their 'Others' unsustainable. Culturally sanctioned forms of violence were one of the mechanisms by which colonisers who feared the appearance of miscegenation demonstrated difference from Indigenous people in colonial Australia. Such multiple overlapping identities may not be well represented in the archaeological record except through exceptional or idiosyncratic artefacts which document specific acts of resistance or dominance. In violently inequable colonial regimes such as the pastoral economy of nineteenth and twentieth century northern Australia, a material record which appears to indicate a high degree of peaceful co-existence and integration masks a series of complex gestures of dominance, resistance and ambiguity on the colonial frontier.

Conclusions: materiality and ambiguity in the study of inter-societal confrontation

The few pieces of broken telegraph insulator act as a nexus for understanding the very ambiguous nature of inter-societal contacts, even those characterised by a high degree of integration and interdependence. While the archaeology of Old Lamboo on a whole suggests the peaceful coexistence and integration of Aboriginal labourers into a pastoral labour force, the study of these particular idiosyncratic artefacts suggests something about the contact experience which

the rest of the archaeology does not—that cross-cultural contact is enormously stressful and often (despite appearances) characterised by misunderstanding, mistrust and ambiguity. These factors are not apparent from the bulk of the material record present on these sites, but are only hinted at casually by a few idiosyncratic artefacts which suggest that all is not quite as it seems. While the majority of the archaeological material appears to demonstrate the acculturation or creolisation of both Europeans and Aboriginal people on the pastoral frontier, the study of particular, idiosyncratic artefacts in conjunction with the oral and documentary evidence demonstrates another aspect of the contact experience which operates at a hidden level, but which has the potential to erupt into inexplicable acts of violence and bloodshed. This paper has demonstrated both the utility of a study of materiality and the particular in understanding the nature of inter-societal contacts, as well as served to highlight some of the inadequacies of traditional acculturation models in describing the culture contact experience.

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