

Australia's Iron Age: Aboriginal post-contact metal artefacts from Old Lamboo Station, Southeast Kimberley, Western Australia

Over the range the 'iron age' is fast coming—indeed it has come.¹

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While Aboriginally flaked bottle-glass artefacts have been widely described in the Australian archaeological literature as the type fossile of Aboriginal post-contact sites, the introduction of metal as a raw material had a far wider and longer-term impact on the development of post-contact Indigenous technologies. However, Aboriginally produced metal artefacts have been poorly described in the archaeological literature. This paper describes an assemblage of post-contact manufactured metal artefacts collected as part of archaeological investigations of the Aboriginal pastoral workers' encampments at Old Lamboo Station, a cattle station located in the southeast Kimberley region of Western Australia. The paper concludes with observations regarding the potential for a study of regional variation in post-contact artefact forms and the need for a more mature approach that acknowledges the complexities in meaning which have been attributed to unmodified 'western' objects by Indigenous people in colonial contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Aboriginally flaked bottle glass artefacts have been widely described in the Australian archaeological literature as the *type fossile* of Aboriginal post-contact sites. Accordingly, there have been several detailed analyses and descriptions of flaked bottle glass artefacts from different parts of Australia (e.g. Allen 1969; Allen & Jones 1980; Cooper & Bowdler 1998; Freeman 1993; Harrison 1996, 2000a; Nieomoller & Guse 1999; Paterson 1999; Ulm et al. 1999). While the use of bottle glass is of some interest to archaeologists due to the continuation of stone knapping techniques in an introduced non-lithic medium, the adoption of metal as a raw material had a far wider and longer-term impact on the development of post-contact Indigenous technologies. However, Aboriginally produced metal artefacts have been poorly described in the archaeological literature. This paper describes an assemblage of post-contact metal artefacts collected as part of archaeological investigations of the Aboriginal pastoral workers' encampment at Old Lamboo Station, a cattle station located in the southeast Kimberley region of Western Australia.

Metal artefacts and their role in post-contact Aboriginal material culture

Few studies have considered explicitly the metal artefact forms from post-contact Australian Aboriginal material cultures. This may be at least in part due to the interest of early ethnographers, and more recently professional archaeologists, in the flaked glass components of post-contact artefact suites as evidence for experimentation in non-lithic raw materials using what are essentially techniques that are transferred from stone working (with some modification). A perceived novelty in the use of 'stone age' technologies on raw materials of European origin has driven this interest. I have discussed this fascination with the incorporation of Western materials into Indigenous material culture elsewhere (Harrison 2002), in relation to the Australian colonial 'doomed race theory' (McGregor 1997; see also Griffiths 1996). In the same way that Aboriginal racial characteristics were considered to be 'weaker' than Caucasian attributes (McGregor 1997: 161), it was believed that Indigenous material cultures would necessarily be 'bred out' by contact with superior European technologies. The process of incorporation of settler material culture into Indigenous technologies was considered to mirror biological processes that were occurring within the bodies of Aboriginal people them-

selves. Following Taussig (1993), there exists a tension in colonial discourses between the mimicry (*mimesis*) of European material cultures in their adoption by Aboriginal people, and the use of this mimicry to construct Aboriginal people as 'other' (*alterity*). Put another way, the use of non-traditional objects in imitation of traditional or western forms represents the confrontation of the colonial 'west' with itself as viewed through the eyes (and material culture) of its own 'others' (Taussig 1993: xv). Metal artefacts seem inherently less interesting in this light as they are either used in unmodified forms, or are more often manufactured into things which are clearly not imitations of western colonial objects. Similarly, they are not objects manufactured for the western colonial trade market, as is the case, for example, with glass pressure-flaked Kimberley points (see Harrison 2002). Most often these tools signify a class of object that represents neither attempts to mimic western colonialism nor to pander to it. Instead manufactured metal tools are often made specifically by and for Aboriginal people in forms which are either a clear post-contact technological development, or in a more traditional 'form' but to meet a post-contact need.

Sharp's (1952) *Steel axes for stone age Australians* provides a classic study of the social and economic consequences of the flow of metal and other non-Indigenous items into Yir Yiront territory during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Sharp builds a picture of social relations that centred on the use, exchange and production of stone axes and emphasises the ways in which stone axes normalised and reproduced particular types of social relationships, particularly gender roles and social exchanges. Through the new ways in which steel axes were distributed, older men lost control of a source of power in their control of access to axes (Sharp 1952: 84). Changes in trading patterns weakened the importance of social activities that revolved around ritual and social exchange, while creating new forms of dependence on white trading partners who exploited this dependence to impose authoritarian structures on members of the group (Sharp 1952: 83–86). Similar post-contact social changes have been noted for the introduction of glass as a raw material for the manufacture of biface pressure-flaked points in the Kimberley (Harrison 2002).

Akerman and Bindon (e.g. 1984, 1995) are among the few writers who have taken a consistent interest in metal artefacts and their role in post-contact material cultures. Working from ethnographic data, museum collections and field observations, they provide a number of overview descriptions of metal arte-

facts from the greater Kimberley region (see also Akerman 1979, 1983). Of particular relevance to this study, Akerman and Bindon (1984) describe a number of metal counterparts to stone adze forms used throughout the Kimberley region. In the areas of the Kimberley where hafted edge-ground stone or shell adzes were used, an oval-shaped piece of shear blade or other metal object approximately 15cm long was attached to a wooden handle of 20cm long (Akerman & Bindon 1984: 369) to form a metal-bladed adze. In areas where the 'tula' type adze was made, a short section of hand shear blade (up to 10cm), metal file or carpenter's chisel was hafted onto a short wooden handle using copper wire or twine and spinifex resin. A curved vehicle spring of around 45cm in length was also made into an adze of this form by merely filing an edge on one or both sides (Akerman & Bindon 1984: 369). Significantly, Akerman and Bindon (1984) note that the metal artefact forms follow closely the traditional geographical division between areas where 'edge ground' and 'tula' type adzes were manufactured prior to sustained European contact with the area. Smith (2001) has recently undertaken an analysis of post-contact artefacts from Gordon Downs pastoral station to the east of Old Lamboo. Several of the artefacts described are typologically identical to those discussed in this analysis.

Although there are various ethnohistoric references to metal tools manufactured by Aboriginal people, these references tend to provide only short descriptions of the tool and its presumed use, rather than details of manufacture and first-hand accounts of the artefact's function. For example, in the Kimberley, Idriess notes:

Stone axes have been thrown away for a horseshoe which, cut in halves and sharpened within a hafted handle, has made an immeasurably superior tool. Any old lump of iron will be fashioned into axe-head or spearhead, in preference to stone. (Idriess 1937: 59)

He later goes on to add:

The last of the stone age men will walk any distance, go through any privation, to secure an old lump of iron: once they possess an iron spearhead they have a weapon of great killing power and one that can be used for years. (Idriess 1937: 62)

These descriptions moralise about Aboriginal people's behaviour, and are little concerned with the details of the objects themselves, except as symbols of a particular type of behaviour or mindset. However they do have the potential to provide valuable insights into the places, times and even names of Aboriginal people who were manufacturing particular artefact forms, a point to which I return later in this paper. What they are less likely to record are the processes or contexts of the use or manufacture of these items, which is also of critical importance to being able to interpret them. Archaeological and material-culture studies have the potential to enlighten these aspects of the use and manufacture of post-contact Aboriginal metal artefacts.

OLD LAMBOO STATION

Old Lamboo Station is a cattle station located approximately 50km southwest of the town of Halls Creek (see Figure 1). In 1901 Frederick Charles Booty, an Oxford graduate who had spent the 1890s working on surrounding pastoral leases, took up the first of several leases that were later amalgamated to form the Lamboo (or *Lambo*) lease. Prior to 1910 Booty built the first homestead at Lamboo, a simple four-room, mud-brick structure on flat ground near a bend in the Mary River. At around this time he also constructed sheds, a well, stone based water tank and trough, and several fences near the homestead. After a succession of short-term managers the station was taken over by Ben Taylor in the late 1940s, and by the early 1950s new station buildings were constructed on site to

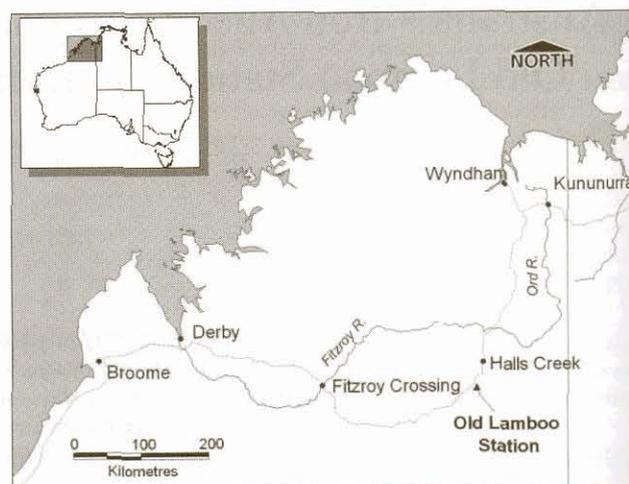


Figure 1. Map showing location of study area and Old Lamboo Station.

replace those built by Booty. The homestead was abandoned in the 1960s because of problems with flooding and the quality of the water supply.

Aboriginal people started camping at Old Lamboo shortly after Booty took up the first station lease. The presence of heavily weathered stone artefacts at the site attest to an earlier use of the place by Aboriginal people, although the pre-contact use of the site appears to have been in the form of small, short-term camps from which to hunt kangaroos on the flat (*bindiri*), and gather fish, freshwater mussels and eels from the river (there are two permanent waterholes at Lamboo called *Yuyuun* and *Ngungmuliya*). By contrast the pastoral settlement phase represented the long-term semi-sedentary occupation of the site by pastoral station workers and their kin. Oral sources suggest that the fringe encampments were home to a seasonally shifting population of up to 70 or more people at times. Booty and Taylor employed many of these people as stockworkers and domestic assistants. Today the camps consist of a discontinuous scatter of stone and glass and metal artefacts and well-defined hearths that spreads over a large flat area on the banks of the Mary River (see Figure 2).

The study

A large assemblage of modified metal artefacts was recovered from excavations and surface collections at Old Lamboo. This study only considers those artefacts that were recovered from the station fringe encampment areas, and on the basis of provenance coupled with discussions with informants, all artefacts described here are considered to be artefacts which were manufactured and used by Aboriginal people at Old Lamboo. Quantification and spatial analysis of these artefacts is presented elsewhere (Harrison in prep.); this paper is concerned only with describing the artefacts themselves and the variability that they exhibit. Discussion of the artefacts with a group of Aboriginal people who had lived and worked on Old Lamboo station was carried out over several fieldtrips from 1997 to 1999, both on site at Old Lamboo and in Halls Creek. Many of these artefacts are still manufactured more or less regularly by Aboriginal people in Halls Creek, and used along with 'modern' manufactured tools such as metal files and steel axes for a variety of tasks. Central to this discussion were the 'Lamboo mob'—Stan Brumby, Jack Ryder, Doris Ryder, Patercake Imbelong, Jerry Woodhouse, Barbara Imbelong and Mrs Jugari's husband (deceased), all of whom lived and/or worked on the station during the period from 1930 to 1960 (see Plate 1). The results of these discussions are included here where they contribute to an understanding of the manufacture, use or meaning of particular artefact forms.

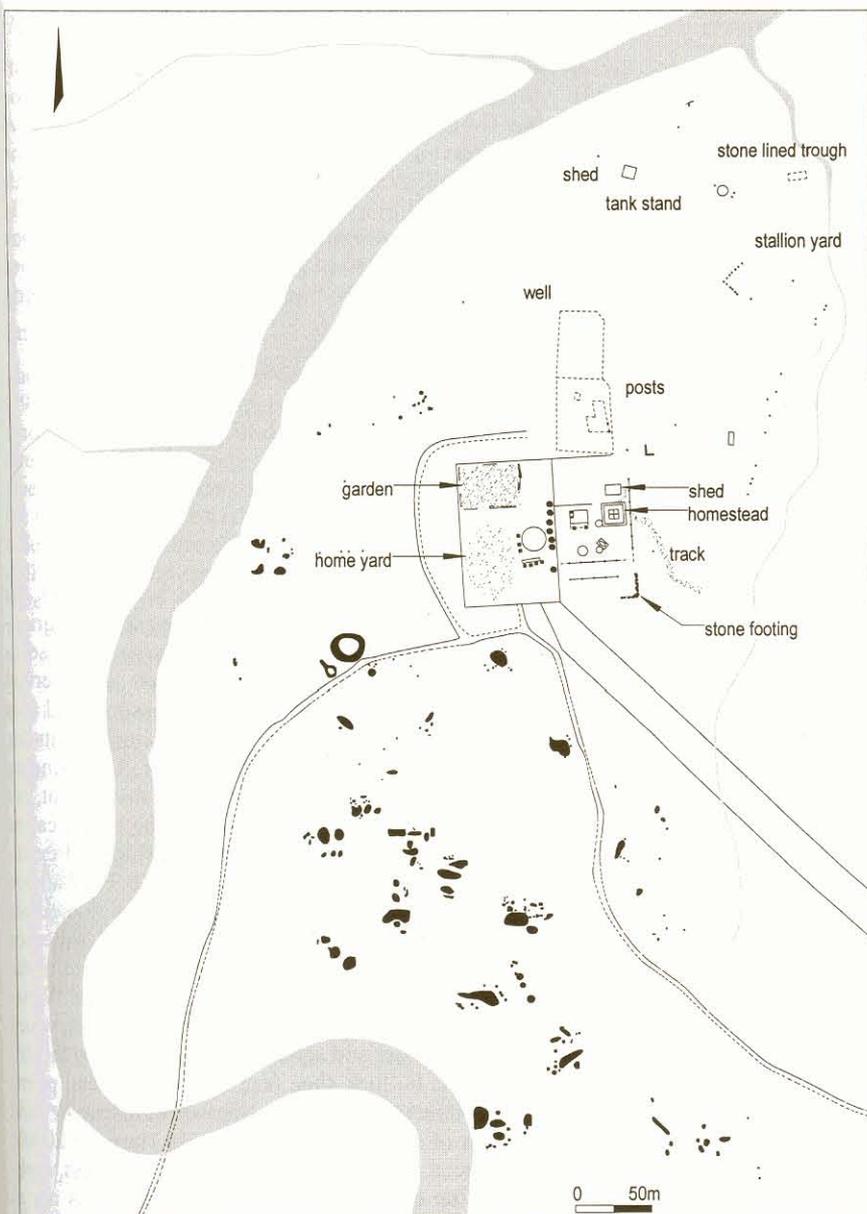


Figure 2. Site plan of Old Lamboo Station homestead showing pastoral infrastructure and the location of the Aboriginal fringe encampment to the west of the homestead as defined by discrete mapped hearths, shown here in solid black infill. The location of the first homestead and associated yard is indicated by the dashed outline.

Plate 1. The 'Lamboob mob' at Old Lamboo Station. Left to right: Jack Ryder, Doris Ryder, Stan Brumby, Joe Blythe (at the time working as linguist for KLRC), author, Pattercake Imbelong (behind author).



THE ARTEFACTS

Horseshoe spearpoints

Horseshoe spearpoints are one of the most obvious of the metal artefact forms present at Old Lamboo, and are represented by numerous artefacts in various stages of manufacture (see Figure 3). This, coupled with detailed information provided by Aboriginal people who lived and worked at the station, means that the modification sequence of horseshoe to point is clearly understood. Typically a horseshoe wears at the 'toe'; when removed and re-shoed one is left with two halves of the original shoe. One of these halves is selected, then heated and beaten to chamfer the edges of the point, closing the holes through which shoeing nails are usually hammered. While beating the edges flat, the bent half-shoe is also being straightened by applying pressure and through emphasis of the battering and flattening of the half shoe. Where people have access to hammer, anvil and/or portable smithy, these tools are used, in other cases 'forging' the tool is undertaken on an open domestic campfire and beating is done with the use of stone anvil and expedient hammers such as a metal axe head or hammerstone. These actions, alternately heating, battering and bending to straighten, are undertaken repeatedly until the horseshoe has been formed into a point blank. This process is relatively laborious, and makes up a large part of the work of producing the point. Informants estimated this process of forging to take several hours to complete.

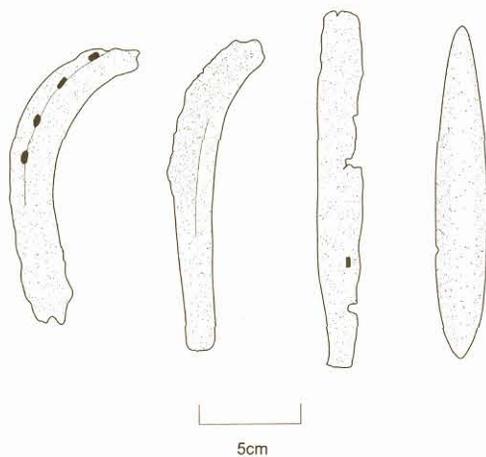


Figure 3. Illustration of horseshoe spearpoints in various stages of manufacture, Old Lamboo Station.

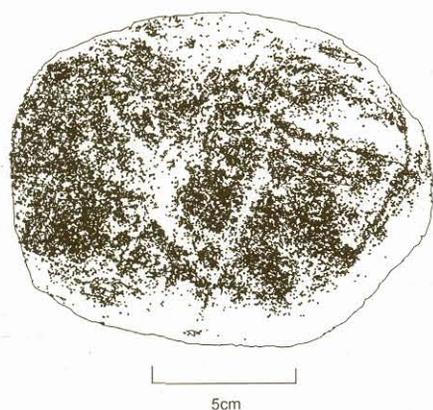


Figure 4. Small, portable metal grinding stone used in the production of horseshoe spearpoint, Old Lamboo Station.

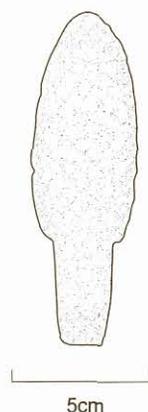


Figure 5. Bullockshoe spearpoint, Old Lamboo Station.

Once the point has been flattened and bent straight, the edges are ground, usually on a small portable expedient grinding slab (see Figure 4), although sometimes large, lower seed-grinding stones, concrete blocks or even commercial whetstones may be used. With increased access to metal files and rasps, these have become the preferred implements for grinding back the edges of horseshoe points. The grinding stage allows the maker to produce not only a sharp point, but to work the point into the desired shape. The modification sequence is illustrated by a number of archaeological examples in various stages of manufacture in Figure 3. The Lamboo mob noted that the shovel spear form made from horseshoes was a post-contact introduction from the north. Iron horseshoe points are known to the Lamboo mob by the term *guralyi*, the Jaru word for horseshoe or by the term 'shovel spear'. Variations on this type include points made on bullock shoes, which tend to be much broader and squatter in profile due to the different shape of the bullock shoe (see Figure 5). Metal points were also sometimes cut from the sides of kerosene or food tins using a pair of shears (see illustration in Harrison 2000b: 47). This produced a point that generally required less working to achieve the desired shape, but one which was not as strong as points made from horseshoes.

The use and trade of iron horseshoe points is well illustrated by a number of ethnographic observations across northern Australia. Davidson (1935: 170) notes the use of iron spearheads by Wardaman people in the Northern Territory in 1934, while Falkenberg (1962: 148–150) discusses the equivalence of metal and bifacially pressure-flaked glass points in trading transactions in the Port Keats area in the Northern Territory. The assumption of many of these authors seems to be that metal spearheads were used for functional purposes. Informants from Old Lamboo noted that iron horseshoe points, in addition to being used for hunting large land game, also had ceremonial uses in the highly stylised masculine fighting that occurred during corroborees and inter-language group meetings. Horseshoe spearheads were generally hafted onto a short (1–1.6m) hand-thrown hard wood spearshaft, although could occasionally be hafted to a long (>2.5m) composite spearshaft in the same way as stone and glass 'Kimberley' type points (see Akerman & Bindon 1995). Bradshaw (1990) discusses metal horseshoe points such as these ones from the ethnographic collections of the Western Australian Museum. An illustration of a metal point is presented by Smith (2001) although it is unclear whether this has been ground or cut into shape from a tin can. The form of the point appears typologically similar to metal points cut from the sides of kerosene tins as discussed above.

Horseshoe knives

Horseshoe knives are a variation on the form of horseshoe points, and go through the same stages of manufacture. However in these tools only one of the outside curved edges of the horseshoe is ground, and there is no attempt made to straighten the tool. A horseshoe knife is illustrated as stage 2 of the modification sequence shown in Figure 3. Informants noted that these are sometimes improved by the addition of a spinifex wax or string-binding hafted handle, which acts as a grip on the lower unworked part of the knife.

Gnarli truck spring adzes

These tools resemble those described by Akerman and Bindon (1984) as previously discussed. Truck spring adzing tools are made from broken or cut-down truck springs, which are battered and ground on one edge to form a flattened sharp point (see Figure 6). Working is limited to the ground extremity of the tool. Rarely, the tool may be ground on two edges to form a double-ended adze. The addition of a piece of fabric at the dull end or in the centre of the spring forms a handle for the adze. Informants knew these tools as *gnarli*, the Jaru word for the 'tula' type adze. *Gnarli* were used for a number of tasks, but were particularly noted for their use in heavy woodworking activities, such as the manufacture of wooden dishes and bowls, and in the manufacture of *mirda*, long, thin hardwood shields. These tools were considered to be functionally equivalent to a 'tula' type adze.



Figure 6. *Gnarli* truck-spring adze, Old Lamboo Station.

Wire and nail indenters

Metal objects used as pressure flakers are very important implements for the manufacture of the highly finished bifacially worked Kimberley point. Wire pressure flakers are particularly useful in the manufacture of glass points. These tools may be made from any long, thin metal object, including screwdrivers, thin metal chisels, long nails and fencing wire. Informants referred to these tools as a *wire*, a term common throughout the Kimberley (e.g. Elkin 1948 and Tindale 1985). A typical *wire* is manufactured from a short length of fencing wire or a long nail, with one end battered flat to form a chisel-like end (see Figure 7). The opposite end may sometimes be

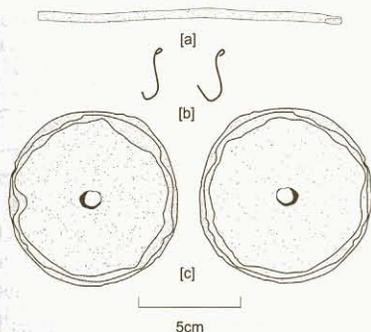


Figure 7. Metal artefacts, Old Lamboo Station: (a) wire Kimberley point flaking tool; (b) two bedspring wire fishhooks; (c) ventral and dorsal view of car-toy wheel made from flattened tobacco tin.

wrapped in a piece of rag or spinifex wax to form a handle. Pressure flaking tools such as these have been widely described throughout the areas of the Kimberley in which pressure-flaked points were manufactured (e.g. Love 1936; Elkin 1948; Tindale 1985; Akerman & Bindon 1995: 93).

The process of Kimberley point manufacture was well known to the Old Lamboo mob. Kimberley points are known as *jimbila* or more rarely *yalga*. After heat treating the prepared core and selecting a flake suitable for point manufacture (*balgi*, described as a 'proper slice'), *dibid bayarnarni lindij barnu*². Pressure flaking is carried out with a *wire* or a long hardwood pressure flaker called *mungarda*. The waste flakes that are left behind from *lindij*³, are called *bulba* or a more generic term for flakes, *inga*. Wire pressure flakers enable the more expedient dentate and denticulate edge treatment of Kimberley points.

Fish hooks

On Lamboo station, fishhooks were manufactured using thin wire, such as the wire found in bedsprings and mattresses. The hooks were formed by bending a small (approx. 8cm) length of wire back onto itself at one end to form an 'eye', and then bending a hook at the opposite end (see examples in Figure 7). The hooks were used with the aid of fishing line, sometimes a commercial nylon type line, and on other occasions with string or bush twine. The hooks were used to catch bream and catfish.

Car Toys

Pull along car-toys are perhaps the most widely distributed post-contact Aboriginal artefact type in Australia. At Lamboo, as elsewhere, a typical pull-along car toy was made from a tobacco tin which was flattened so the top and bottom parts stayed together, with a hole punched through the centre through which a piece of wire was threaded. Archaeologically, the residues of these toys look like that illustrated in Figure 7. A number of variations allowed embellishments on this theme. Informants discussed elaborate forms of car toys that were manufactured on Lamboo station that had two wheels or four wheels and a 'body' made of a length of wood, which could be pulled and turned with the assistance of a long twisted wire 'steering wheel'. Similar examples of both simple and elaborate forms of pull-along car toys are illustrated by Haagen (1994), Rockchild (nd) and Smith (2001).

Rattles were also made from 'strings' of flattened tobacco tins that were threaded onto wire rings and hung around the necks of cattle or horses. Archaeologically, it would be difficult to distinguish between tobacco tins used to manufacture such rattles and those used as car toys, except by looking at the configuration of associated wire components of the artefact.

Metal digging sticks and bars

Truck springs such as those discussed above also often doubled as digging tools, being functionally equivalent to a woman's digging stick. However these objects were often too heavy for carrying long distances, and a preferred digging tool was made from a long (approx. 100–150cm long) metal bar, such as that used in assisting the process of shoeing a horse or bullock. The bar is usually finished by battered or filing the digging end to form a flat, chisel-like scoop, which assisted with digging or the use of the bar as a levering tool. This bar is known by the name *garna* or *gana*, which is the same name as for a wooden digging stick.

Billies, buckets, lamps and cups

Numerous finds of modified food tins were made at Old Lamboo. Empty food tins were used for the manufacture of a variety of different types of containers of different sizes. Billies and buckets were made by the addition of a semi-circular hoop

of wire, the ends pushed through the top of the tin opposite each other (see also Smith 2001). Wire was also bent to form a hook to be used for getting billys on and off a fire. This tool is known as a 'fire hook'. Small, empty food tins could also be used in an unmodified form as a cup (Figure 8), although more frequently a handle was formed by leaving a small section of the upper metal lid attached to the tin, which was folded together on itself then over and down towards the base of the cup. Interestingly, this technique differs from that often used in western NSW, where a 'plaited' wire handle was favoured (personal observation, see Figure 8). The consumption of tea (*nullija*) was very important to Aboriginal people living on Old Lamboo station, and it was one of the basic ration food items. The desire for tea and tobacco are often cited by Aboriginal people as reasons for the move from bush to station (see also Kimberley Language Resource Centre 1996; Baker 1999). Another form of modified tin was used for a kerosene candle or lamp. In this case a single hole was punched through the top of a tin which was resealed after being filled with tallow or in some cases kerosene. A wick made of string or twine was pushed through the hole in the top of the tin, and lit (Figure 8).

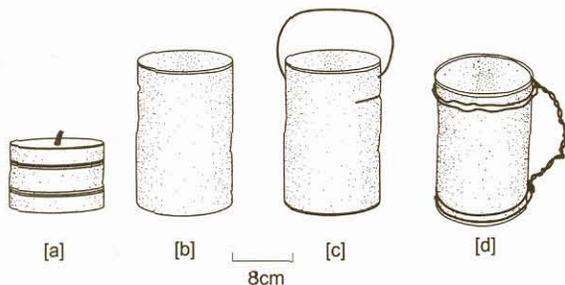


Figure 8. Tin-can artefacts. Left to right: Small tin-can lamp with wick; otherwise unmodified tin can used for drinking vessel; small tin-can billy; tin-can drinking mug. (a)-(c) Old Lamboo Station; (d) Brewarrina Mission, western NSW.

Kerosene tins and sheet iron

Flattened kerosene tins and sheet iron was recycled for use as furniture and as components of wet season shelters (*jiljilmirri*) and houses at Old Lamboo. This tradition of use of sheet iron and flattened kerosene tins continues in Aboriginal housing in Halls Creek and is discussed in Ross (1987; see also Smith 2001; and for a broad overview of Aboriginal post-contact housing: Read 2000).

Stone artefacts that were manufactured in imitation of or in conjunction with metal items

It should be noted that many of the metal artefact forms required the use of stone artefacts in their manufacture. The small portable grindstones used in the production of horseshoe points have already been discussed. In some cases, flaked stone artefacts were manufactured by Aboriginal people to take either the form or function of a metal tool. One such example are several small, flat pebbles that were flaked into can-openers at Old Lamboo station, to be used in the assistance of opening powdered milk tins (see Figure 9). These tools functioned primarily as a lever for opening press top tins (such as powdered milk tins) although some informants recalled the use of similar tools for puncturing holes in standard food tins such as tins of meat to extract the contents. In form the flaked pebble resembles closely an expedient knife or piercing tool. The artefacts do not appear to derive from any pre-contact artefact form that was manufactured in the area,

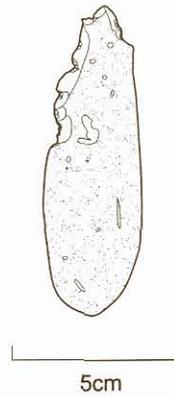


Figure 9. Flaked-pebble tin-can opener, Old Lamboo Station.

and only appear on sites used after sustained European settlement of the region.

UNMODIFIED 'WESTERN' ARTEFACTS

Many of the metal artefacts recovered from excavations and surface collections in the Old Lamboo fringe encampment were unmodified, manufactured western objects, such as tin cans, belt buckles, wax match boxes and tobacco tins (see Plate 2). Although these items could not be identified as 'Indigenous objects' on the basis of an analysis of their form or fabric, informants none the less perceived many of them to be 'Aboriginal' artefacts. The significance that such unmodified 'western' artefacts were attributed by Aboriginal people contradicts their classification as non-Aboriginal artefacts. For example, on posing the question 'Is this old time match tin a blackfella or a whitefella thing?'⁴ the group of informants became quite confused. These old tobacco and match tins are very important to Aboriginal people, as both the informants and their kin used them in the past. Their presence at these fringe encampments physically attests to one of the important reasons for Aboriginal people 'coming in' to pastoral stations (see also Baker 1999); people frequently picked them up from the ground or pointed to them in conversation about the hunger for tea and tobacco that was one of the reasons for Aboriginal people moving in from the bush. On the other hand, these are clearly objects that were introduced by *gardiya*. The entanglement of Aboriginal and settler material culture on the pastoral frontier belies any attempt to quantify 'Aboriginal' and 'European' artefact forms, as has been

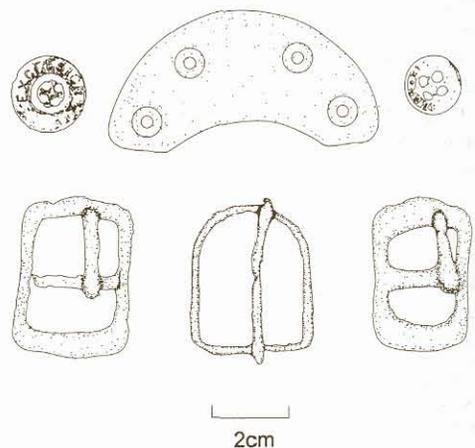


Figure 10. Metal artefacts, Old Lamboo Station. Top row left to right: 'Excelsior' trouser button; metal boot plate; metal shirt button. Bottom row left to right: manufactured belt buckle; 'home made' belt buckle made from horse harness buckle with piece of wire wound around it; manufactured belt buckle.



Plate 2. Mrs Connie Jugari's husband (now deceased) holds a Bell's wax vestas No. 4 type match tin, Old Lamboo Station, 1997. Unmodified items of 'Western' material culture such as match and tobacco tins are considered to be 'Aboriginal' artefacts by former Aboriginal pastoral workers from Old Lamboo, while often classified as 'non-Aboriginal' items by archaeologists.

attempted in other archaeological studies of Indigenous–European contact (e.g. Birmingham 1992). The idea that such objects are not 'traditional' (e.g. Smith 2001) in the sense in which they now speak of the continued existence of the past in the present (after Sztompka 1993: 59–60) is simplistic and runs counter to the meanings that these objects are attributed by contemporary Aboriginal communities.

Similarly, belt buckles, horse harnesses and trouser buttons are seen to be significant Aboriginal artefacts by informants (see Figure 10). The importance of stockwork, its cowboy uniform and associated paraphernalia to Aboriginal men in the north of Australia has been discussed elsewhere by a number of authors (e.g. McGrath 1987; Rowse 1987; Lukin Watson 1998; Rowse 1998; Baker 1999; Sullivan 1983; Shaw 1986, 1992; Ross & Bray 1989: 38–46; Kimberley Language Resource Centre 1996). Rowse has discussed the role of the patronage of the pastoral station manager in assigning rank to cattle station workers (Rowse 1987; see also Bruce Shaw's introduction to Sullivan 1983: 10–27). A scale of prestige operated on pastoral stations that was expressed not only in the ways in which workers were treated, but also in the distribution of food and other resources such as clothing, how an individual was paid for their labours and the physical distance at which an individual was commonly allowed to approach the homestead (Rowse 1987: 89–90). The location of these objects within the stockcamp is thus understood by informants to be the result of a range of social factors, and the presence of such artefacts as buckles and trouser buttons to be associated with the status of the person that camped in a particular place. 'This one here must be a ringer'⁶ was what Pattercake Imbelong once said as he picked up a fancy belt buckle from one of the camp-sites.

DISCUSSION

I have noted elsewhere the potential utility of a better understanding of Aboriginal post-contact artefact forms in independently demonstrating post-contact Aboriginal land uses in Native Title determinations (Harrison 2000b; see also discussion in McDónald 2000, Fullagar & Head 2000 and Veth 2000). Many of the artefacts here are regional forms that are limited in their distribution in the landscape in both time and space. Similarly, regionally delineated post-contact metal artefact forms are also known outside of the study area, such as the tin-can drinking mugs from western NSW discussed earlier. Other artefact forms occur widely throughout Aboriginal Australia, but were known to be only rarely made by non-

Aboriginal people. For example, Aboriginal people have made car wheel toys such as those described here over the last 80 years throughout all regions of Australia. Their presence in the landscape has the potential to place Aboriginal people at a particular time and place independently of their own testimony. Even where metal objects have not been modified their provenance or the combination of particular artefact types is instructive of the presence of post-contact Aboriginal settlements. For example, Kabaila (1995: 86) has documented the frequent finds of mouth-organs at post-contact Aboriginal camping places in Wiradjuri country in NSW, along with a tradition of the manufacture of other home-made musical instruments such as 'bush' violins. By documenting known post-contact Aboriginal places, we are building up a database with which to assess the likely presence or use of historic places by Aboriginal people for which there is little or no information available. The presence of such objects in the landscape can be shown to clearly demonstrate the presence of particular groups of Aboriginal people at a time post-dating sustained non-Indigenous settlement of that area.

Aside from the possibilities in Native Title, the study of the inter- and intra-site distribution of metal artefacts on post-contact sites also has the potential to describe the dynamics of post-contact Aboriginal land-use practices, along with the impact of the cross-cultural encounter and changing social practice within Aboriginal groups after sustained non-Indigenous settlement. For example, at Old Lamboo there is evidence to suggest that metal and glass spearheads were not only functional items but symbolic capital that represented masculine status (see Harrison 2002). The availability of the raw materials to manufacture these items was linked closely to relations with settler–pastoral station managers, and hence these items are also linked symbolically to work status and cross-cultural social relationships. The inter- and intra-site distribution of these objects can thus be read as the residues of cross- and inter-cultural competition and social aspiration (e.g. see Harrison in press).

Many post-contact archaeological studies in Australia have explicitly classified artefacts as 'traditional' versus 'non-traditional'/'western' (Smith 2001), or 'Aboriginal' versus 'European'/non-Indigenous (Birmingham 1992, 2000; Paterson 1999). Archaeological analysis of post-contact Aboriginal material culture must focus not only on items *manufactured* by Aboriginal people, such as the spearpoints described here, but also seek to understand the alternate meanings that were attributed to unmodified 'western' objects by Aboriginal peo-

ple. Drawing on Nicholas Thomas's (1991, 1994, 1999) work in the Pacific, it is clear that material objects are constantly subject to recontextualisation and imagining. Hence objects are not what they were made to be, but what they become in the process of creative recontextualisation. In colonial contexts social identity is fluid and fashioned out of appropriation and exchange. Objects may be entirely 're-authored' by Indigenous peoples once they are acquired, even in the absence of any physical modification of the object itself. This makes the attribution of an object as 'belonging' to or 'signifying' one or other culture very dangerous, and undermines many of the assumptions of creolization theories as they have been applied to contact archaeology (Lightfoot 1995). The discussion of the unmodified artefacts such as belt buckles and match tins discussed here provides a poignant illustration of the dangers of archaeological classification systems that see 'traditional' or 'Aboriginal' artefacts as only those artefacts (like flaked stone and glass) that are modified to appear like pre-contact artefacts. The modifications themselves are superficial; meaning and attachment runs deeper than the form of the object. While it might be useful for archaeologists to distinguish between unmodified objects and objects that are modified in such a way that they can be attributed to the actions of a particular ethnic or racial group, the distinctions discussed above cannot be sustained.

The study of post-contact artefact forms is particularly beneficial in community-based (after Greer 1995, Greer et al. 2002) projects that seek to integrate a range of different methodologies and knowledge systems. Archaeological methodologies can contribute to Aboriginal understandings of continuity and transformation in technology and post-contact land-use strategies, whilst Aboriginal oral histories and commentary can unveil the meanings and processes behind the artefact forms. The archaeological examination of post-contact Aboriginal artefacts has the potential to open new directions to archaeology as it is currently being practiced in Australia, and presents possibilities for stronger connections with Aboriginal communities and individuals in the study of the recent, shared Indigenous and settler past in Australia.

CONCLUSION

A range of modified metal artefact types were present in open archaeological site contexts in the Aboriginal pastoral camps associated with Old Lamboo Station. Information obtained through oral testimony has in many cases greatly contributed to our knowledge of the use, symbolism and contexts of manufacture of these items. Aboriginally modified post-contact metal artefacts form an important yet poorly documented archaeological resource, the study of which has potential applications in Native Title research and in understanding continuity and transformation in technology and post-contact land-use strategies. While the study of post-contact artefacts manufactured by Aboriginal people is a valuable and necessary exercise in itself, I have also highlighted the need for a more mature approach that acknowledges the complexities in meaning which have been attributed to unmodified colonial objects by the 'colonised'. The 'Iron Age' has been no less significant in Australia than the post-Neolithic in the Old World in the material record of (post-)colonial Aboriginal Australia.

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NOTES

- 1 Idriess, Over the Range: *Sunshine and Shadow in the Kimberleys*, 1937; p. 59.
- 2 Jaru, '[you] break it up to pressure flake'.
- 3 Jaru, 'Pressure flaking'
- 4 The use of the words 'blackfella' and 'whitefella' to describe Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people is widespread in Kimberley Kriol and Aboriginal English in northern Australia and does not signify a racist tone.
- 5 Word used in southern Kimberley languages for non-Aboriginal people.
- 6 The term 'ringer' denotes a particular role in mustering and branding cattle. In the sense in which the word is used here, Pattercake is referring to the high status attributed to the head ringer in the stock-camp.

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