

# **Transactions and Transformations: artefacts of the wet tropics, North Queensland**

Edited by Shelley Greer, Rosita Henry, Russell McGregor and Michael Wood



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## Transactions and Transformations: artefacts of the wet tropics, North Queensland

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#### COVER

Cover image: Rainforest Shield. Queensland Museum Collection QE246, collected from Cairns 1914.  
Traditional Owners, Yidinji People

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The ARC Discovery project 'Objects of Possession: Artefacts Transactions in the Wet Tropics of North Queensland 1870-2013' research team standing next to some *Bagu* in the Cairns institute.  
Left to Right: Bard Aaberge (PhD candidate on the ARC project), Shelley Greer, Russell McGregor, Maureen Fuary, Trish Barnard, Mike Wood, Corinna Erkenbrecht, Rosita Henry.

# From Flame to Fame: Transformation of firesticks to art in North Queensland

Rosita HENRY

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Among the many different kinds of artefacts collected in the rainforest region of North Queensland by European collectors during the late 1800s and early 1900s is a uniquely shaped fire-making tool. This paper explores the significance of such fire-makers for the Aboriginal people who originally made them, the collectors who sought them, and Aboriginal artists today who reference them in contemporary works of art for a global art market. Tracing the history of transactions concerning this particular type of fire-maker provides a dynamic field for reflection on the concept of value.

📄 Firesticks, Rainforest Aboriginal, John Archibald Boyd, John Gaggin, Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre, Bagu, Jiman

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In early 2009 a collective of artists linked to the Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre in Cardwell, North Queensland, which represents rainforest Aboriginal artists from the Nyawaygi, Gugu Badhun, Warrgamay, Warungu, Bandjin, Girramay, Gulngay, Jirrbal and Djiru people, met to discuss ideas for the artworks they hoped to produce for exhibition at the Cairns Indigenous Arts Fair (CIAF)<sup>1</sup> later that year. The artists' discussion gave birth to a new form of sculptural art based on the traditional fire-making tool of their ancestors (figure 1). This paper explores the value of such fire-makers for the Aboriginal artists who today reference them in contemporary works of art sold on the global art market, for the settlers who collected them as artefacts, and for the Aboriginal people who originally made them. I focus specifically on two early collectors of these objects, John Archibald Boyd and John Gaggin. Both men were based at Ripple Creek cane plantation on the Herbert River near Ingham, North Queensland, during the latter part of the nineteenth century, J.A. Boyd arriving at Ripple Creek on 15 September 1882 and Gaggin joining him on 26 August 1883.

## ARTEFACT TO ARTWORK

The particular type of fire-maker in question has two parts: a flat base and drill sticks. The base (or body) was traditionally carved from the soft wood of the milky pine tree (*Alstonia scholaris*) while the sticks were made from the harder wood of the wild guava tree (*Eupomatia laurina*). The Aboriginal artists of the Girringun Art Centre, whose ancestors made this object, call the base *bagu* and the sticks *jiman* (the wild guava tree from which the sticks are made is also called *jiman*). The artists also refer to the *bagu* as the 'body'. For easy transport in the past, the *jiman* were usually fastened to the back of the *bagu* with string tied around the neck and base, so that they extended below the body like legs. The body was painted with distinctive designs using different coloured ochres and charcoal. It was carved in an anthropomorphic form with head and eye sockets into which the sticks were inserted to make fire. Fire was produced by rubbing the sticks

between the palms of the hand using a drill-like motion. Of the few examples of this object that were collected during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most were carved without appendages. However, there are two examples in the Queensland Museum, collected circa 1915, that were carved with what appear to be legs (figure 2). As with most artefacts collected during this period, the name of the Aboriginal maker was not recorded by the collector, but it may be that these two fire-makers were an innovation by a particular carver, in response to the artefact market.

For the 2009 Cairns Indigenous Arts Fair the Girringun artists decided to make the *bagu* out of clay rather than the traditional wood and were amazed with the result (figure 3). As Nicolas Rothwell (2013) puts it, 'The figures came out of the kiln transformed; the glaze had depth, the ochres glowed, the figures with their mask-like, sketchy features seemed alive'. Thus, the very things that were once used to create fire were now themselves transformed by fire.

While creating artworks based on this particular object was something new for the Girringun artists, the practice of turning for inspiration to the things their ancestors had made was, in fact, not novel. The artists already firmly believed that the source of creativity for most, if not all, their works is the 'old people', deceased ancestors who are believed to still be present in 'country', and ancestral 'Story Beings' who 'reside in and are coterminous with particular places' and who imbue places with creative energy (Langton, 2002: 260; Henry, 2012: 212). Even before the opening of the Girringun Aboriginal Arts Centre, Aboriginal people from this region and the rainforest country further north had been basing their art works on the things their 'old people' had made that are now held as artefacts in museums all over the world. Master weaver Abe Muriata (b. 1952), for example, had already revitalised the difficult skill of bicornual basket weaving by his Girramay ancestors, to create artworks. Others, like Michael Boiyool Anning (b. 1955), had produced the iconic rainforest shield of their forebears as a contemporary sculptural form (Aaberge et al., 2014). Anning began carving



FIG. 1. Fire-maker. Collected by J.A. Boyd in 1898 at Ripple Creek near Ingham, North Queensland. Photograph: Rosita Henry

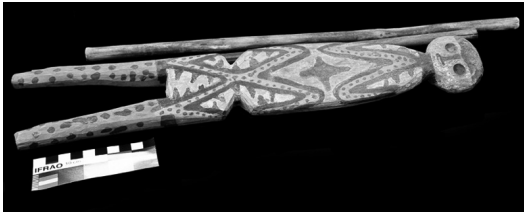


FIG. 2. Fire-maker. Collected by Constable Creedy in Cardwell, North Queensland c.1915. QE827. Source: Queensland Museum.



FIG 3. Artists Emily Murray, John Murray, Ninney Murray, Sally Murray and Doris Kinjun with display of *Bagu with Jiman* at the inaugural Cairns Indigenous Arts Fair, 2009. Photograph: Valerie Keenan, Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre.

shields in 1990, working in wood. In 1998 he became the first Queenslanders to win a major prize at the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards in the Northern Territory. In 2009 Anning exhibited his artworks at the first Cairns Indigenous Arts Fair, including works that, like those of the artists from the Girringun collective, referenced the unique anthropomorphic fire-makers that are the subject of this paper.

The terracotta clay *bagu* with *jiman* created by artists from the Girringun Arts Centre were an instant hit at CIAF 2009. Since then, many more have been created for exhibition and sale each year at CIAF (figure 4) and also at other venues. For example, the Queensland Art Gallery exhibited a collection of the fire-makers purchased in 2010 with funds from Xstrata<sup>2</sup> Community Partnership Program Queensland through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation.<sup>3</sup>

In 2011, Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre artists were short-listed for the Indigenous Ceramic Art Award

(ICAA), first held in 2007 to showcase Indigenous ceramic arts from all over Australia. Maureen Beeron, Sally Murray, Trish Beeron and Eileen Tep were short-listed for their work *Bagu with Jiman*, which included six different ceramic pieces, and Daniel Beeron was short-listed for two works, *Bunyaydinyu Bagu* and *State of Origin Bagu*. The latter was inspired by the State of Origin Rugby League Series and glazed half blue and half maroon to represent the different team colours.

Also in 2011, the Girringun artists exhibited an installation of sculptural fire-makers, *Bagu on the Strand*, at the Townsville City Council's Strand Ephemera Sculptural Festival and won the Artistic Excellence award donated by Xstrata Community Partnership Program. For this exhibition (2-12 September 2011), the artists expanded upon the *bagu* artwork they had developed for the Cairns Indigenous Arts Fair. Fifteen life-sized ceramic, timber and aluminium *bagu* were created for the installation by different artists, some of which were not only painted but also incorporated woven fibre and metal sculptural forms (figure 5).

The popular success of the *bagu* also led to an installation being commissioned for the

redevelopment of the Cardwell foreshore, which had been destroyed by Cyclone Yasi in February 2011 (figure 6). These permanent *bagu* sculptures, which are based on designs by Girringun Aboriginal Arts Centre artists Eileen Tep and Charlotte Beeron, are made of fibreglass and 'stand like sentinels against the backdrop of Rockingham Bay and Hinchinbrook Island' (Keenan, 2013).

While the *bagu* on the foreshore at Cardwell stand fixed in their place of origin, others are on the move. Not only have they been purchased by museums, art galleries in Australia and overseas and by art dealers for the global art market, but today they literally travel up and down the Queensland coast between Cairns and Brisbane by rail, featured as public art along the length of the Tilt Train (figure 7).

Thus, the fire-makers have been given new life, transformed and 'transvalued' in the twenty-first century (Dalsgaard & Otto, 2014). Yet, while they appear to have begun their journey from flame to fame relatively recently, as I reveal below, they have a much longer and more complex past that has played a part in fostering their enlivenment in the present.



FIG. 4. *Bagu* at CIAF 2012. Photograph: Valerie Keenan, Girringun Aboriginal Arts Centre.



FIG. 5. *Bagu on the Strand* installation, Strand Ephemera Sculptural Exhibition, Townsville, 2-12 September, 2011. Artistic Achievement Award. Project funded by Australia Council for the Arts. Photograph Rosita Henry.



FIG. 6. *Bagu on the Cardwell foreshore*. Photograph: Rosita Henry.



FIG. 7. *Bagu* travelling on Queensland Rail train as public art (launched September 2011). Funded by Arts Queensland Art + Place Program. Photograph: Valerie Keenan, Gurringun Aboriginal Art Centre.

## ARTEFACT COLLECTION

Aboriginal people all around the continent traditionally made and used fire-makers of various sorts. Today such implements can be found widely dispersed and carefully preserved in museums across the globe. However, the anthropomorphic type of fire-maker that is the subject of this paper is relatively rare. The few existing examples of this object began to be collected by European collectors during the late nineteenth century, but they appear not to have entered the global trade in artefacts in the same way as other iconic rainforest objects, such as the large rainforest shields and swords and the uniquely shaped bicornual baskets (Erckenbrecht et al., 2010). I was not able to find any such fire-makers in the British Museum, the Pitt-Rivers Museum, the Musée du Quai Branly, or the Rautenstrauch Joest Museum in Cologne (and my search continues). However, there are eleven that were collected during the late 1800s and early 1900s in the Queensland Museum, including one collected by John Gaggin in 1895 (registration number QE559), one collected by Clement Wragge between 1887 and 1900 (QE2093) and three donated by Constable Creedy in 1915 (QE825, QE826, QE827). Museum Victoria also has several examples (Brayshaw 1990: 302-30), including one donated by John Gaggin (X983), and the Australian Museum in Sydney has one on display (EO11411) which was also possibly collected by Gaggin. I discuss these two fire-makers (X983 and EO11411) in detail below.

During the 1960s and 1970s there was a revitalisation of artefact production in the Cardwell region due to the efforts of local resident, Gladys Henry, who encouraged Jirrbal, Girramay and Gulngay people to make artefacts for sale at a small shop she established at Bellenden Plains homestead near Cardwell. She also purchased many of these artefacts herself. In 1979 Gladys Henry sold her collection of 588 artefacts for \$5,800 to the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council, which presented the collection to the Material Culture Unit at James Cook University in 1989. Among the objects were 83 fire-makers. These, and the bulk of the rest of the collection, have since been transferred to the Queensland Museum (Barnard, 2014).

It is clear that a large number of fire-makers were made and sold as artefacts during the 1960s and 1970s, and throughout the 1980s and 1990s, including through the Deeral Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation in Babinda, which sold at least one to Museum Victoria in 1990 (X92585). Yet, these implements were not as widely collected as other artefacts during the early collecting period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is interesting to consider why this might be the case.

Firstly, the manufacture of this particular form of fire-maker appears to have been confined to specific rainforest peoples in a relatively confined local area, unlike the rainforest shield. While there were slight regional differences in shape, and they featured different painted designs, rainforest shields were produced right across the coastal rainforest region from the south of Ingham to the north of Cairns (Aaberge et al., 2014; Abernethy, 1984; Best, 2003; Goldfinch, 2014; Hale, 1989; see also Buhrich, Greer & Goldfinch, this volume). In contrast, the anthropomorphic fire-maker appears to have been a more localised product. Another reason that very few of these fire-makers found their way into the hands of early collectors might be that their Aboriginal owners were reluctant to part with them. I discuss this possibility below.

## COLLECTORS – JOHN ARCHIBALD BOYD AND JOHN GAGGIN

I first became fascinated with this form of fire-maker after I began to do research on the diaries of an artefact collector by the name of John Archibald Boyd. He began collecting Aboriginal artefacts in the Wet Tropics region in 1882, after he came to work on Ripple Creek cane plantation near Ingham, which was owned by his brother Mitchell Boyd in partnership with the brothers John and Joseph Wood (Vidonja Balanzategui, 2011: 34). J.A. Boyd had become an experienced collector during his earlier years in Fiji (1865-1882), collecting mainly natural specimens for the curator of the Australian Museum in Sydney, Edward Ramsay, the ornithologist Alfred John North, also of the Australian Museum, and

for Sir William John Macleay, Australian politician and naturalist, who donated his collection to the University of Sydney in 1890, forming the nucleus of what is today the Macleay Museum.

According to his diary, J.A. Boyd arrived at Ripple Creek Plantation on Friday 15 September 1882, accompanied by his 12 year old son Reggie, whose Fijian mother had remained behind in Fiji. Boyd's diaries from 1882 to 1898 provide evidence that he purchased artefacts on numerous occasions directly from Aboriginal people for cash and/or tobacco. His first purchase appears to have been on Thursday 5 October 1882: 'Bought for 1/2lb tobacco /2s/8d/ a shield & spear & got for 4 plugs some necklaces and a boomerang' (Boyd, 1882-1898).

Boyd's diaries reveal that he and his son Reggie enjoyed life at Ripple Creek immensely, spending much of their spare time on horseback, hunting and fishing. Almost every Sunday, Boyd would call in at 'the Blacks camp' on the plantation to collect Aboriginal people and their camp dogs to accompany him on hunting expeditions 'across the river'. For example, his diary entry for 11 September 1887 reads: 'Crossed river with a few Blacks & Armstrong. Self got 8 Wallaby. Went to Corroberree at Blacks camp tonight' (Boyd, 1882-1898). Boyd also records a number of camping trips during the Christmas holidays to Hinchinbrook Island where, according to his diary entry for 25 December 1882, they 'Got a lot of oysters & the Blacks took us to where we could get water. Bought some fish spears, canoe etc.' Boyd actively attempted to further his knowledge about Australian Aboriginal people. For example, he spent 29 December 1887 reading *The Australian Race* by E.M. Curr, which had been published in 1886, only a year earlier (Boyd, 1882-1898).

Boyd left Ripple Creek in 1898 after he was advised by his doctor to leave the tropics for the sake of his health but his son Reggie remained in North Queensland continuing to work at Ripple Creek and for other planters and pastoralists in the region.<sup>4</sup> Whether Reggie also collected artefacts is not clear. However, he clearly took an interest in Aboriginal cultural beliefs and practices. When

the anthropologist A.W. Howitt sought information on Aboriginal cultural beliefs and practices in the vicinity of Ripple Creek, Boyd forwarded the questionnaire to his son. On 25 September 1901 he returned the questionnaire, recommending Howitt to get out of his armchair and into the field:

I have the pleasure of enclosing the questionnaire returned by my son with some remarks thereon...It occurs to me that if you could find the time to take a run to the Herbert River... you could acquire more information in a few days than in years of correspondence. (Boyd, 1901)

While Reggie may or may not have collected artefacts, Boyd's friend Gaggin certainly did so. Gaggin also furnished A.W. Howitt with information on the beliefs and practices of Aboriginal people of the Herbert River (Howitt, 1904: 498-99).

John Gaggin came to North Queensland on 26 August 1883 from Fiji, having been persuaded by Boyd to join him at Ripple Creek. Gaggin initially worked as the store-master on the plantation. According to Boyd's diaries, Gaggin and he spent much time together exploring the countryside and generally enjoying life, hunting and fishing. Gaggin also accompanied Boyd to Java in 1890 in search of labour for the plantation. Gaggin acted as witness at Boyd's marriage to his second wife, Sarah (Jeanie) Miskin, in 1894, and dedicated his book, *Among the Man-eaters* to his 'old chum and comrade' (Gaggin, 1900). The two men maintained a life-long friendship.

The extent of Gaggin's collecting practices is unknown, but he collected several of the carved and painted anthropomorphic fire-makers. As mentioned above, one of them was donated to Museum Victoria (X983) and another was acquired by the Queensland Museum (QE559). It was placed on display in the latter museum during the early 1900s as a 'war charm' called 'Tikovana' (figure 8).

Gaggin collected more of these fire-makers but exactly how many is unknown. He visited A.J. North, of the Australian Museum, in 1896 and gave him one as a gift. In a letter dated 8 February 1896, North



FIG. 8. Fire-maker. Collected by John Gaggin c. 1895 and donated to the Queensland Museum on 17 September 1914. QE559. Source: Queensland Museum.

wrote of Gaggin's visit to J.A. Boyd as follows: 'He gave me one of his Tikowinnas, a charm which now descends from the handle of the dilly-bag you gave Mrs North when passing through to England' (North, 1896). According to North, Gaggin had more than one of these artefacts with him at the time of his visit in 1896.

I wondered what might have become of the particular fire-maker that Gaggin gave to North. As North was an employee of the Australian Museum, I began my search at the Australian Museum archives. There was no record of North having donated the fire-maker to the Museum, but I discovered correspondence about the trade of a 'tikovina' for boomerangs in 1903 (Australian Museum Archives, Exchange Schedule, No. 17, 1903). A fire-maker described as a 'tikovina' was offered to the Museum by Dr J. Sanders in exchange for two boomerangs on 5 March 1903. The address Sanders gave was c/- A.J. North. Whether Sanders was the actual owner of this artefact or whether he was acting on behalf of North is not stated in his correspondence with the Museum. It is possible that the fire-maker that Gaggin gave North is the same as the fire-maker that Sanders traded to the Australian Museum (E11411), particularly as John Gaggin provided information to the curator, R. Etheridge, on this particular artefact (Boyd, 1903).

## FIRESTICK AND FALLING STAR: JIGUBINA

Before J.A. Boyd departed North Queensland in 1898 he bought more artefacts to add to his collection, which he packed in cases and took with him to the home he eventually built at Eden on the south coast of New South Wales. Most of these artefacts are still in the possession of his descendants, the bulk of them in the care of his granddaughter, Elaine Roberts until she passed away in August 2015. During a visit to her home to document and photograph the collection in 2013, the Senior Curator of the Macleay Museum, Jude Philp, and I recorded nine beautifully painted fire-makers. Later, as I was reading Boyd's diaries I came across this entry for 24 November 1898:

Bought a lot of tikovinnas. They are used by the blacks for making fires in places where a lot of wood is not obtainable. Each black claims to know the maker of each tikovina but not of shields. Old Paddy<sup>5</sup> could not recognise the "coat of arms" on any though he said he picked out the tikovinnas. (Boyd, 1882-1898)

Was Boyd referring to the collection of fire-makers that were still in the possession of his granddaughter, I wondered? I had never heard the name *tikovina*. Was *tikovina* the name that Aboriginal people had given him for these things? I consulted with Aboriginal elder, Russell Butler Snr, whose mother was born at Ripple Creek and whose grandmother's name was, in fact, Nora Boyd. Nora's Aboriginal name at birth was Girdjul. She later took the name Boyd after the owners of the plantation at Ripple Creek, where she lived and where she eventually gave birth to Russell's mother. Nora was a fluent speaker of the coastal dialect of the Wargamay language (Biyay), the language of the people in whose country Ripple Creek plantation was located (Dixon, 1981: 15).

Russell Butler at first did not recognise the name *tikovina* but as we sat and puzzled over the word together, his eyes lit up and he exclaimed '*jigubina*'! *Jigubina* he told me are small spirit beings that inhabit the countryside, but mainly the top of a mountain in the region that is renowned for having 'those lights up there'. According to Butler, 'even today modern farmers during the 1960s saw

heaps and heaps of lights there and thought they were UFO. The name of that mountain, Mt Tyson, is Jigubina so when I go north I always talk to that mountain'. Butler said that if he goes fishing in the area he will always leave a fish behind for Jigubina. According to Butler 'when you make fire you have to talk to the spirit to ask permission to make fire. When you see the smoke starting to rise you know he has given permission. He sits beside you'. I confirmed Butler's account of *jigubina* with several other Aboriginal people from the region. For example, a woman instantly recognised the term as referring to what she called 'fire spirits'. She said that she had been told about these little spirits by her elders when she was a child. The elders would sometimes tell stories about these spirit beings to scare children into behaving well. She thought they were mischievous rather than evil, but could cause misfortune, including bushfires.

In her collection of stories by Aboriginal people from the valleys of the Davidson Creek, Tully and Murray Rivers, Gladys Henry (1967: 55) includes one about Jigubina:

The Chic-ah-bunnah [Jigubina] was a spirit in the shape of a man, and was always sighted rushing through the air. He emitted a strange blue light and was blinding to look upon. When he took off from the earth there was a frightful bang and a roaring rushing noise. He ate glowing red coals and only came to earth at certain places. The three known places in the area were Goondarlah Hill on the Murray River, the large rock at the back or western side of the crest of Mt Tyson (Mt Bulleroo) and another rock away up the Davidson Valley. The creature was frightful to behold and had a long hideous nose. Kitty Chilburrah was said to have seen one personally while on Palm Island, and the local witness, a little girl named Jaa-Jin-oo (the little eel), claims to have seen one in the last few years. There is no evidence of the chic-ah-bunnah having done anyone harm. He merely instilled great fear in the hearts of the beholders.

In his vocabularies of Wargamay and of the neighbouring Dyirbal language spoken to the north, Dixon (1972, 1981) records *jigubina* as meaning 'falling star' but *bayi jigubina* as referring to 'a legendary person, who can take the form of a falling star' (1972) and 'a mythical person – an ugly old bugger' (1981: 129). According to Dixon *bayi* is a noun marker (Class I of four classes of noun marker that he identified in Dyirbal) which refers to 'men, kangaroos and possums, most snakes and fishes, a few birds, most insects, the moon, storms, boomerangs and money' (Dixon, 1972: 47). The Class I noun marker *bayi* also indicates things that are 'visible and there', perhaps signifying that *jigubina* is thought to be a Being that is manifest in the world. The fact that *jigubina* is marked by *bayi* means that it is associated with human masculinity and animatedness (Dixon 1972: 308). On the other hand, 'anything to do with fire', including light, sun and stars, falls into Class II, along with women, fighting and shields, marked by *balan*. Thus, firesticks (*jiman*) are referred to as *balan jiman* (Aboriginal People of Jumbun, 1997: 41).

Dixon collected several unpublished texts concerning the 'mythical' Being, Jigubina, during his fieldwork among Dyirbal speakers in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. For example, he recorded and transcribed the following account by George Watson (Malanda, 11 September 1978). Here, I give only Dixon's English translation.

Jigubina is always flying up in the sky  
He throws the firestick out in front

Dixon was told that Jigubina, the shooting star, throws out a firestick and where it falls he will land:

Then he follows it, later on he flies, he goes down there, walking around in Mamu country, to the north and to the east he goes, he keeps flying, does Jigubina.

According to the texts that Dixon recorded over 40 years ago, and my recent enquiries in 2014, Jigubina appears to be a rather ambiguous character. He is spoken of in the singular as a particular spirit being that is at the same time a man, or that was previously a man. But *jigubina* is also spoken of in the plural. Clearly *jigubina*

(in the plural form) continue to inhabit the lifeworld of many rainforest Aboriginal people today as capricious beings that may do good deeds, such as warn people of danger, but may also cause harm. The following story was told to Dixon in Djirbal by Chloe Grant at Murray Upper on 11 August 1964. She was remembering what the tribal elders used to tell the children in the camp.

‘Don’t walk about too much when Jigubina’s around!’ ‘Or Jigubina’ll tickle you.’ He’s a man; he turns into one; then he’s really a man. He was the first person ... He lit a fire, and cooked a scrub-hen egg. Pushed the egg and the coals into his mouth until it was full. The coal made a light there in his stomach. The hot coals shone out a lot. That’s the light. That’s what they told me.

This man who turned was a man from the camp. He turned into Jigubina. Some Jigubinas come from way out west; some Jigubinas come from Mamu country; some are Jaganbarra coming way down there; some are Nungunbarra Jigubinas coming; to frighten all of us here.

Jigubina went down to the south, to get a painted basket (mindj). He’s flying back up there with it. He’s coming from the north, bringing a north-side painted dilly-bag (jabul) in return; Jigubina is.

Jigubina fell down somewhere there on a flat rock; he made a big noise.

‘Put the fire out and sit quiet for fear of Jigubina!’

‘That road lying out there belongs to Jigubina’

‘Don’t burn a light lest he see it!’ ‘Lest Jigubina come and frighten us all. He go round and round the camp chasing us round frightening us.’ ‘Yes.’

‘Yes, sit quiet for a good while, lest he run us down; he’d never leave us alone, even for a day, but he’d tickle us and keep on doing it until we shit ourselves; shake the

urine out of us; he’d tickle us, and keep on doing that until we died.’

They all pointed him out flying along up here, all the people sitting in the camp did.

‘Look out, look out, look out; beware of this Jigubina!’ [Noise of falling] There he goes.

‘There, who are you?’ they all called, and he just up there answered, ‘budlll’, a big indistinct noise.

According to the narratives, Jigubina is a Story Being associated with light and, thus, also with fire and the implements that are used to create fire (light). This is perhaps why, when Boyd asked his Aboriginal informants the name for the fire-makers, they responded with the word ‘jigubina’ (which J.A. Boyd heard and wrote as ‘tikovinna’). Boyd and Gaggin both referred to the fire-makers by that name, variously spelling it ‘tikovinna’, ‘tikovina’, ‘tikowinna’, ‘tikovana’ in their correspondence<sup>6</sup>. A.W. Howitt (1904: 499) includes an illustration (figure 9) of such a fire-maker in his book *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*. The particular fire-maker was donated by Gaggin to Museum Victoria (registration number X983). Howitt describes it as follows, citing Gaggin as his authority:

The *Tikovina* is a flat thin piece of soft wood cut from the north Queensland fig-tree. It is about a foot long, by about three or four inches wide, brought gradually to a point at the bottom, while the top is cut in the rude representation of a man’s face with mouth and eyes. It is painted all over the front red and black with human blood and clay. As a sort of war-charm it is worn round the neck

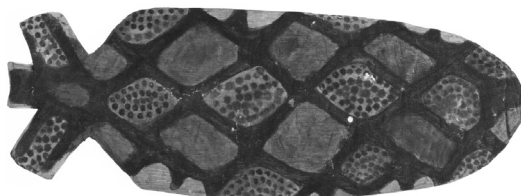


FIG. 9. Bagu or fire-maker from Herbert River, Queensland. Collected by John Gaggin. X983. Source: Museum Victoria.

of a warrior, and hangs down between the shoulders behind, showing that the wearer means fighting, and that he will not miss with his club, spear, and boomerang, while the weapons of his adversary will glance aside from him. It is kept hidden away from women and children, who seem afraid of it. (Howitt, 1904: 499)

Howitt (1904: 498) also includes an account of Aboriginal beliefs concerning the origin of these fire-makers, as conveyed to him by Gaggin:

In these tribes there is a striking belief in a supernatural being called *Kohin*. He is said to have his dwelling in the Milky Way (*Kuling*)...*Kohin* came long ago down from *Kuling*, and appeared to their fathers as a carpet-snake. He said that where he came from was a good land and in it a vast river full of splendid fish. He had two *Tikovinas* with him, which he presented to the tribe, and told them that if they were good men and wore them, they would not be killed in fight, and that they could fly. Two men tried it, and succeeded in going from tree to tree as the flying-squirrels do. Afterwards, becoming more expert, they flew from mountain to mountain. He then told them to get two large bags filled with gum-tree leaves, and to start for the Milky

Way. This they did, and confirmed all that *Kohin* had said. One returned, but the other refused to leave such good quarters, and sent his *Tikovina* by the other. *Kohin*, who had remained on the Herbert while the two were absent, and had cured some old women of sores and had made them young again, now went away, leaving the two *Tikovinas* with the tribe, telling them that when he sent another, marked red in the centre, they would have all to go to *Kuling*, and live there.

The stories above provide evidence that this particular object had value for Aboriginal people of the Herbert River, over and above its utilitarian value as a fire starting tool. The fire-makers had special significance because of their association with a powerful Ancestral Being and because of their capacity to transform men and protect them in battle. The bodies of the fire-makers may also have been considered consubstantial manifestations of *Jigubina*, or 'transformations of subjects into objects' (Munn 1970). If so, then this might explain why so few of these fire-makers made it into the hands of collectors and museums during the late nineteenth century. However, rainforest shields, painted bicornual baskets and most other objects also have significance beyond their use value, so the rarity of the fire-makers in museums may primarily be due to their limited geographical occurrence, rather than their cosmological value.



FIG. 10. 'Double headed' fire-maker found by J.A. Boyd in a hollow tree, possibly at Ripple Creek, Herbert River, sometime between 1882 and 1896. Photograph: Rosita Henry, 13 November 2013.

## ON VALUE: UTILITARIAN AND COSMOLOGICAL

According to David Graeber (2005), it is by paying attention to what people put their creative energies into that anthropologists can determine what people actually value. He notes that value can be defined 'as a way people's own actions become meaningful to them, how they take on importance by becoming incorporated into some larger system of meaning' (Graeber, 2005: 451–2). The men, who carved and painted fire-makers clearly put creative energy into their production. As noted above, Boyd recorded in his diary that his long term Aboriginal informant at Ripple Creek, Paddy, could recognise the 'owner' of each fire-maker on the basis of the particular design that was painted on it. Whether by 'owner' is also meant 'creator' he does not made clear. Whatever the case, for their Aboriginal owner/creators, fire-makers instantiated both positively and negatively valued social ties among themselves and with the world around them. Like the rainforest shields and the painted bicornual baskets, the fire-makers were associated with narrative knowledge and designs that linked Aboriginal people into a broader cosmological network of ancestral connections (Aaberge et al., 2014). The fire-makers not only served a practical purpose in enabling people to produce fire but were associated with the Story Being Jigubina and with ancestral life force. More than this, it is possible the artefacts were themselves believed to be actual transformations of this life force.

Yet, while Gaggin seems to have had some understanding of the cosmological significance of the fire-makers and emphasised their use as 'charms' that were believed to protect men in battle, Boyd thought of them as merely a fire starting tool. When the curator of the Australian Museum, R. Etheridge, wrote to Boyd to ask him for information about the artefact (E11411), described as a 'tikovina', that the Museum had procured in exchange for two boomerangs from Dr Sanders, Boyd replied as follows:

I regret that I have to differ from my old friend Gaggin's opinion. My inquiries led

me to infer that it was merely an aboriginal domestic article answering to the flint and steel of our ancestors & is used for making fire in wet weather or when crossing country where suitable timber for frictional purposes is scarce. I have seen a Black take one of the reeds which are usually fastened at the back of the 't', insert it in the 'eye' & get a light by twisting it rapidly between his open palms. I have some ten of these articles / mostly made for sale, some out of packing cases / which are valuable solely as showing the different patterns & colours used by aboriginals for ornamental purposes. Among them is a bona fide article that I found in a 'plant' in a hollow tree. It is unique to me in its pattern & colouration, it is also 'double headed' / 2 eyes at each end /. All I have represent an archaic human form...I can give you no information as to how far their distribution extends but if you write to my son 'Reggie', Ripple Creek, Herbert River, he may possibly be able to tell you, as he knows the Blacks of the country for hundreds of miles around. (emphasis in original; Boyd, 1903)

Nine of the fire-makers that were in Boyd's collection at the time he wrote this letter were still in the care of his granddaughter Elaine Roberts in 2015, over 110 years later. Some indeed appear to have been made from packing cases, but among them is the 'bona fide article' that Boyd describes, the one that he found stashed in a hollow tree (figure 10).

There is also one fire-maker in the possession of a great-grandson of J.A. Boyd (Elaine Roberts, 2015, pers. comm., 3 January). Thus, remarkably, unless Boyd later swapped any of them with another collector, all ten fire-makers that he referred to in his letter to Etheridge remain today in the possession of the Boyd family.

For J.A. Boyd's descendants these artefacts hold value as memory objects that were part of their childhoods. The artefacts hold heritage value for them as things that they inherited from their

ancestor. Boyd's granddaughter, Elaine Roberts, remembers spending holidays at her grandfather's house in Eden with the artefacts part of the everyday lives of the members of the household:

When he built 'The Hollies' at Eden, the house was designed with a long hall from the front to the back door. On both sides of it he hung all the shields and tikovinna as they were so colourful and people always remarked on them. He kept the spears and boomerangs in a room he called his den, which also contained his diaries... (Elaine Roberts 2015, pers. comm., 12 January)

Elaine remembers using the woven dilly bags in her grandfather's collection when her father took her prawning at Lake Curalo, the lake beside which 'The Hollies' was built.

We would go out at night with lanterns and wade around in knee-deep mud. The prawns were attracted by the light. When we saw them we would catch them in the hand nets we each had, then put them in those woven baskets we carried over our shoulders. (Elaine Roberts 2015, pers. comm. 20 February)

According to Elaine, her own children and their cousins, J.A. Boyd's great-grandchildren, also have strong memories of holidaying at his house at Eden where the artefacts were displayed on the walls. The artefacts provided fascinating evidence of the exciting life of their adventurous ancestor and his contact with Aboriginal people during the frontier days of early European settlement in North Queensland.

Yet, what did these artefacts mean to Boyd himself? What was their value to him? How did he come by these artefacts in the first place and why did he go to the trouble to carefully pack them and transport them to his new abode when he left Ripple Creek? There is no evidence that Boyd at any time attempted to give away, sell or donate to museums or anyone else any fire-makers, unlike his friend Gaggin. While Boyd donated numerous other artefacts, including rainforest shields, baskets and other tools

and weapons to the Macleay Museum,<sup>7</sup> he did not donate fire-makers. Perhaps this was because the 'tikovinnas' that he had in his possession were made for him personally by Aboriginal men who lived and worked at Ripple Creek, at least one of whom (Paddy) he had known for over 15 years. According to Boyd, in his letter to Etheridge at the Australian Museum (8 March 1903), he only had one 'tikovinna' that he considered 'bona fide', the one he had found stashed in a hollow tree.

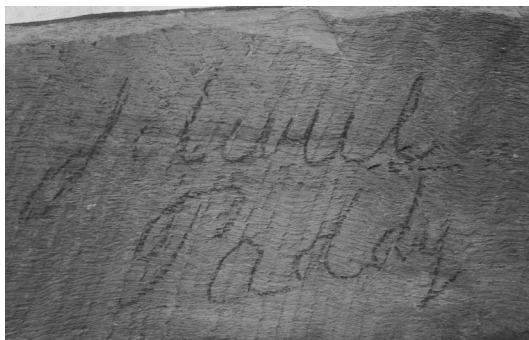
It is possible that Boyd did not offer the museum any of his fire-makers because he thought that museums would only value 'bona fide' artefacts, things actually made in a pre-contact context. There was a widespread belief at this time that Aboriginal people were 'doomed to extinction' (McGregor 1997). Thus, artefacts that were made prior to European colonisation were highly sought after. The value of artefacts was determined by their perceived authenticity, 'defined in terms of the context of their production' (Erckenbrecht et al., 2010: 353). For example, German physical anthropologist Hermann Klaatsch (1863–1916), who spent time in North Queensland during 1904 and 1905, travelled by horseback to find remote Aboriginal camps in the rainforest where he could procure artefacts produced in as pristine a context as possible (Erckenbrecht et al., 2010: 353; Erckenbrecht, this volume).

On the other hand, Boyd may have hung on to all the fire-makers in his possession because they stored place memory for him of Ripple Creek as well as of the particular Aboriginal men he had spent so many years with while living there. The fact that Boyd wrote the names of the Aboriginal men who had made them on the backs of some of the fire-makers is telling. Two are inscribed with the name 'Jilwul Paddy' and one with the name 'Wunjorn Willie' (figures 11 and 12).

Boyd's diaries reveal that a Paddy was living in the Aboriginal camp at Ripple Creek in 1882. During the 15 years that Boyd spent at Ripple Creek, Paddy regularly supplied Boyd with natural specimens and appears to have been a key informant with regard

to the Aboriginal language names for various flora and fauna. It appears that Boyd developed close relationships of trust and friendship with some of the Aboriginal people at Ripple Creek. Therefore, it is not inconceivable that upon the eve of his departure, these men decided to present him with fire-makers they had made especially for him. While Boyd notes that he paid for the fire-makers, to define the transaction as commodity exchange in contrast to

gift exchange is problematic. There is not a distinct boundary between gift and commodity exchange (Henry et al., 2013; Gregory, 1982). Perhaps Boyd carefully packed the fire-makers and other artefacts he had collected during his years at Ripple Creek, transported them to his new home in NSW and chose never to part with them, because their value for him lay mostly in the treasured memories they held of his life and his relationships with Aboriginal people at Ripple Creek. For Boyd, as much as for the Aboriginal men with whom he transacted, 'artefacts constitute and *instantiate* social relations' (Henare, 2005: 2), past, present and future. It appears that the fire-makers also had aesthetic value for Boyd and his family because, unlike most of the other artefacts, which were kept out of sight in his 'den', they were put on display in the hallway with the rainforest shields 'as they were so colourful and people always remarked on them' (Roberts 2015, pers. comm., 12 January).



FIGS 11 & 12. Jilwul Paddy and Wunjorn Willie written in blue on the backs of the fire-makers. Photographs: Rosita Henry, 13 November 2013.



## CONCLUSION

Tracing the history of transactions concerning a particular type of fire-maker originating in the Wet Tropics of North Queensland presents us with a dynamic field for reflection on the concept of value. By focusing on just this one type of fire-maker I have attempted to explore how artefacts 'circulate in different regimes of value in space and time' (Appadurai, 1986: 4). These fire-making utensils carry the value of their ability to generate fire and light and for their correspondent cosmological connection to ancestral creative power. In terms of their capacity to make fire, they are instruments of transformation. Yet they are potentially themselves transformations of the creative energy of *jigubina*, Story Beings that have both dangerous and protective qualities depending on how people engage with them.

Although their utilitarian value as fire-making utensils diminished from the 1860s onwards, due to the introduction and adoption of flint and steel, their cosmological value has survived. From the 1890s and into the early twentieth century the fire-makers gathered value as 'artefacts', things that could be traded, bought, sold, donated and gifted among collectors and museums. During the mid to late twentieth century Aboriginal people began to make the fire-makers for sale to tourists and eventually they were revitalised as contemporary artworks. Thus transformed, they continue to carry with them their significance as *jigubina*, which through the creative endeavour of the artists have not only been freed from the confines of museum stores and displays but also from the limits of place, as cosmopolitan travelers making their way around the nation and the world.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## □ ENDNOTES

1. Cairns Indigenous Art Fair (CIAF) is an event sponsored by Arts Queensland that brings together commercial art galleries and Indigenous art centres to showcase and sell art by Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists. Since the first CIAF in 2009, the fair has grown to be a significant annual event.
2. Xstrata was a multinational mining company. On 2 May 2013 ownership of Xstrata was fully acquired by Glencore.
3. Artists whose *bagu* were exhibited include Betty Andy, Daniel Beeron, Maureen Beeron, Nancy Beeron, Theresa Beeron, Nancy Cowan, Nephi Denham, Allison Murray, Doris Kinjun, Emily Murray, John Murray, Sally Murray and Ninney Murray.
4. Reginald Boyd's niece, Elaine Roberts, has conducted research on him. Elaine (pers. comm. 20 Feb. 2015) notes that in 1887 Reggie worked for a Mr. Atkinson of 'Greenvale' station and that in 1888 his address was Oak Hills Station via Cardwell. In October 1893 he signed an agreement with A.C. Gardiner, Marybank: 'He was to receive one Pound per week, board and lodging, and horses for working the estate'. In March 1895 he was manager of 'Bronte' for Mr. Crosby. The 1908 Census records him as working as a storekeeper at Ripple Creek and the 1913 Census also records him as living at Ripple Creek. He died on 20 April 1919 and his death certificate notes that he was a 'grazier' at Baalcoomo in the North Kennedy district. According to Elaine, 'Reggie's life revolved round breeding and training horses, both for racing and for shows. He was involved in Aboriginal affairs and problems. He never married as he did not believe mixed marriages were a good idea'.
5. An Aboriginal man named Paddy was living at Ripple Creek in 1882, the year Boyd arrived on the plantation as Boyd noted in his diary (22 October 1882): 'Got Paddy at Blacks camp. Shot a pair of piping geese in lagoon. Saw a black duck & killed a pair of cockatoo...' Boyd's diaries evidence that over a period of fifteen years Paddy regularly supplied him with various natural specimens – especially birds and bird eggs. For example, on 7 April 1897 Boyd notes that 'Paddy brought 3 eggs taken from nest containing 4, one of which he broke'.
6. There is also a fire-maker in the Museum Victoria (X 087363), identified as a restricted ceremonial object, which was acquired from the Australian Board of Missions. Written in pencil on the object are the words 'war charm Tikovilla Herbert River'.
7. Included in what Boyd donated to the Macleay Museum are the following artefacts: baskets (ET817, ET20139, ETB1069, ETB1070), boomerang (ETH101), spearthrower (ETH1111), and rainforest shields (ETH1120, ETH1121, ETH1122, ETH 1130).

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