

Speaking lands



During the 1870s the remote rivers and valleys behind Tully, Cairns and Mossman became a field of intense mining activity. Mining communities were established and a railway was constructed up the rugged, densely forested Barron River Gorge. These developments amounted to an invasion of the homelands of the Aboriginal people and led to a rapid decline of their cultural practices.

Following in the miners' footsteps came zoologists, botanists, ornithologists, ethnographers and photographers, all of whom observed and recorded aspects of an Aboriginal culture that had flourished for thousands of years next to clear streams and under the luxuriant canopy of the rainforest.



Fred Mandinggarabai, Son of Jabulum
Yarrabah, Queensland
Photo: N B Tindale 1938
South Australian Museum Tindale Collection

Fred Mandinggarabai, a Yidiny man resident at the Yarrabah Mission near Cairns in the 1930s, was an important informant for anthropologists Ursula McConnel (1888-1957) and Norman Tindale (1900-93) who each independently collected data about the rainforest tribes in the 1930s. Shields made by Mandinggarabai in 1938 comprise a significant part of this storyline. Shield manufacturing and painting processes were recorded in photographs and film footage, and these shields now form part of the collections of the South Australian Museum.



Tat:akal or backbone of a fish is represented on this shield.

North Queensland
Djabugay People
South Australian Museum
McConnel Collection

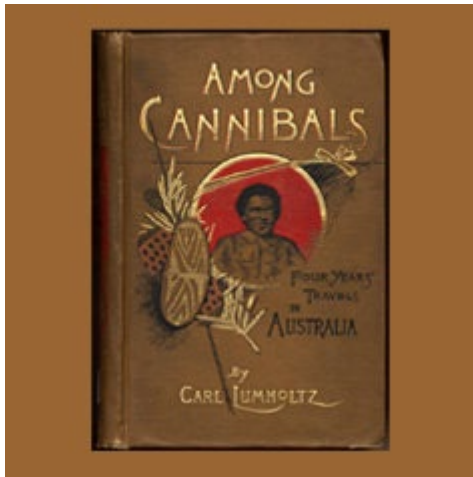
Working in the 1930s, anthropologist Ursula McConnel, whose valuable collection of Queensland Aboriginal artefacts the South Australian Museum is proud to hold, established that many of the abstract forms on shields and other implements have totemic significance, reflecting these peoples' close association with, and deep understanding of, the rainforest environment in which they lived.



Another example of the colourful and bold patterning on these rainforest shields from Northern Queensland.

North Queensland
Djabugay People
South Australian Museum
McConnel Collection

Carl Lumholtz, a Norwegian ethnographer who came in search of the tree kangaroo, 1880-4, was one of the first ethnographers to camp and work on the Herbert River. He was followed by Archibald Meston who made two botanical expeditions to the Bellenden-Ker area for the Queensland Government in 1889 and 1905, and Walter Roth, a North Queensland Aboriginal Protector who recorded detailed ethnographic data for the government authorities from 1898 to 1900. The Italian Don Giuseppe Capra and the Dane, Eric Mj̄sberg both made collections of rainforest shields between 1908 and 1913.



Book cover of Carl Lumholtz's observations and records of his time amongst the Northern Queensland Aborigines.

Cover of 'Among Cannibals'
Carl Lumholtz 1889
South Australian Museum Library

Lumholtz spent fourteen months living alone among the North Queensland Aborigines on the Herbert River, observing and recording their life, customs and language. He also made extensive collections of the flora and fauna of the region as well as compiling an important collection of ethnographic artefacts, which now form part of the Christiania University Museum, Norway. He later carried out extensive field work in Mexico, Arizona and India, and lived among the Dajak people of Borneo.

Throughout the late nineteenth century many Aboriginal peoples were photographed in a number of contexts: on their homelands; in missions; in metropolitan centres both in Australia and overseas; and in studio interiors. Photographers constructed elaborate tableaux in which Aboriginal people were placed, 'locating' them as subjects within scientific, deterministic and commercial frameworks.



Ye-i-nie, King of Cairns
Photo: A Atkinson 1905
South Australian Museum
Tindale Collection

Ye-i-nie, of the Yidiny tribe, was the father of Joe Fourmile, who is recorded in Tindale's Yarrabah genealogies of 1938-39. He is wearing a necklace of strung nautilus shells. Tindale noted in 1938 that "such necklaces were received in trade by the Tjapukai [Djabugay] from the [northern] Koko Kulunggur with whom they maintained communication for purposes of exchange."

These two photographs graphically and poignantly illustrate the pressures and impositions that colonial society placed on Aboriginal people in the later half of the nineteenth century. Wearing a King Plate, and placed in a constructed tableau setting, the subject is transformed into an emblem of 'the primitive'. Ye-i-nie's shield bears a very unusual design.



Norman Tindale marked this road map with tribal and language boundaries in 1938.

'Cairns and Hinterland Road Map'
with N B Tindale Notations
Norman B Tindale 1938/72
South Australian Museum
Tindale Collection



These objects speak to us today of the ingenuity of these people and give evidence of the complex social relations that existed among the rainforest tribes, and of their close affinity with the natural environment. Symbolism associated with marine life, animals, birds and insects, leaf patterns, and astronomical observations make the rainforest shields of North Queensland both complex and captivating.

This 'birkala' or turtle design shield was reproduced in Ursula H McConnel's 1935 Art in Australia article, 'Inspiration and Design in Aboriginal Art'.

North Queensland
Djabugay People
South Australian Museum
McConnel Collection

The South Australian Museum is fortunate to hold an extensive collection of artefacts and documents from the North Queensland region, largely owing to the efforts of two important Australian anthropologists, Ursula H McConnel and Norman B Tindale. The McConnel collection of North Queensland artefacts, once held by the University of Sydney, was at one time destined for the Queensland Museum. Tindale, who held a special interest in the 'Little People of the Rainforest' was responsible for the acquisition for the South Australian Museum of the McConnel collection in 1951.