

Spears as Evidence of Cultural Transmission in Pacific Islands

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Abstract

Australian Spears, which were the subject of some ethnological study in the early 20th century, have been not studied in depth for decades. This project uses Cultural Transmission theory to frame and investigation of how cultural information and material has moved between Australia and the Pacific Islands, using spears as a specific measure. Cultural Transmission Theory describes the transmitting of information vertically, between generations (e.g. mother to child) and horizontally, between individuals within a generation (e.g. peers). This theory can be applied usefully to spears because some information is known about the way different Pacific cultures made and taught the craft of spear-making.



A map of the tribes of Australia

Methods

The Pacific Ethnology collection at the American Museum of Natural History is one of the few fully digitized, publically available anthropological collections in the world. The software that is used to process the data at the museum, however, does not have the ability to generate charts or graphical representation of multiple catalog numbers.

The geographical distribution of the Pacific spears in the collection was calculated by batch processing PDFs of the catalog information and photos and then manually creating a chart, which is included at right.

Overview of spears by type and location in the American Museum of Natural History Pacific collection

Locale	Number of Spears
Australia?	5
Australia	42
Victoria	8
Western Australia	20
Queensland	5
North West Australia	2
Cape York	2
Melville Island	1
Elisabeth Island	1
South Sea Islands	11
Massim Islands	1
New Caledonia	32
-New Guinea Lavongai Island	27
New Guinea Port Moresby	8
New Guinea (not specified)	142
Bismarck Archipelago	12
Solomon Islands	189
Admiralty Islands Maty Island	13
Admiralty Islands (not specified)	35
New Britain (not specified)	20
New Britain Matupi Island	11
New Hebrides	7
Duau	1
New Ireland (not specified)	5
New Ireland Kurali Region	1
New Ireland Nusa Ireland	6
Fiji	67
Wuvulu Island	4
Solomon Islands Buka Island	8
Bismarck St. Matthias Island	4
Bougainville	11
Admiralty Islands Pak Island	3
Admiralty Islands Baluan Island	4
Admiralty Islands Lou Island	3
New Hanover Melanesia	25
Admiralty Islands Hayrick Islands	2
New Britain New Pommern	1
Purdy Islands	4
Loyalty Islands	4
Solomon Islands San Cristobal	1
New Guinea Four Days Inland	4
Admiralty Islands Manus	30
Pororan Islands	1
Solomon Islands Ulowa	3
Solomon Islands Rennell Island	10
Bellona Island	14
New Guinea West of Hagen	8
New Guinea Aitape	16
New Guinea Aitape District	28
New Guinea Tchambuli	31
New Guinea Yuat River	15
New Guinea Middle Wahgi	2
New Guinea Dutch	4
New Guinea Kaup	35
New Guinea Mindam	3
Caroline Islands	2
Jaluit Atoll	3
Gilbert Islands	56
Society Islands	3
Hawaii	2
Kermadec Islands	1
Tonga Island	2
Samoa	24
Niue Island	5
Cook Islands	5
Marquesas Islands	4
Tahiti	2
Wiwak District	1
Washkuk District	5
Kwoma District	2

n = 1076

Results

The main interest of the project is to look at cultural transmission through spears in different parts of Australia. We have studied the spears from the Pintupi, Arunta, Warramunga, Ngatatjara, Mandjildjara, and Pitjantjara tribes. The way in which spears are designed and made is very culturally specific and is influenced by materials available and the transmission of the knowledge of spear-making between generations of people in a group. We set out asking the question “Are similarities in styles reflective of knowledge of spear making being traded between cultural groups?”

We located the tribes and they were found in Northern, Southern, Western, and Central Australia. The two tribes that were found in Northern Australia were the Pintupi and Warramunga. Through further analysis, the two tribes had similar dialects, which mean they could communicate easier than other cultures. Since they communicated, the resemblance in the spears might have been from talking to each other. The placement, or in other words their origins, of the tribes is essential in this study because there might be another aspect of life that two or more tribes share and is being shown through their spears.



A 4-prong spear used for hunting from the Ngatatjara tribe.



Two spears used for decorations by the Arunta tribe.



Decorative Spear head used in ritual used in the Mandjildjara tribe.

Conclusion

The design and context of the spear tell us about who created the spear and for which purpose it was used and possibly traded. For example, we know that the child’s spear was used by children to learn how to hunt and throw a spear. The barbed spear was used for a quick and efficient kill by the hunters of the tribe. The locales associated with spears along with their designs point to ways in which various Australian groups might have interacted; the hunters might have had contact with other hunters and changed their spear because the other tribes’ spear killed faster and easier. Some groups’ child spears may not have been collected because they were not made or passed down between generations. Some tribes spears for children are very significant, using the spears for initiation ceremonies. Children are also taught at a young age because the hunters are the backbone of the tribe to sustain the food supply.

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