Monuments to colonialism? Stone arrangements, tourist cairns and turtle magic at Evans Bay, Cape York

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Abstract

This paper reports on an archaeological survey at Evans Bay, Cape York, which recorded a large number of stone arrangements on the rocky headland at Evans Point. We interpret two phases of stone cairn construction; the first associated with the building of stone cairns as part of joint Aboriginal and Islander turtle increase ceremonies, and the second with the partial demolition and rebuilding of these stone cairns by tourists and tour operators. Rather than dismiss the disturbance of such sites by non-Indigenous people, as many archaeologists have done in the study of Aboriginal stone arrangements, we seek to document this as archaeological evidence in its own right. We argue this evidence records a specifically colonial response to an Indigenous landscape which has its roots in earlier acts of defacement and erasure of Aboriginal monuments by ‘invaders’ in Cape York. We suggest that such sites of defacement/erasure are best understood as documenting broader colonial processes, representing palimpsest responses to forms of Indigenous land demarcation and belonging which clearly work against colonial efforts to dislocate and disassociate Aboriginal people from their land.

Stone arrangements at Evans Bay, Cape York

Evans Bay is a sandy embayment located 1.5 km to the immediate southeast of Cape York, which is the northernmost extension of the Australian mainland. Two rocky headlands, Evans and Ida Points, occupy the northwestern and southeastern extents of the bay respectively, and are separated by 2.5 km of sandy beach behind which is found low lying forest and scrub. Mount Bremer rises to a height of 128 m immediately behind the rocky headland at Evans Point. Freshwater springs are found at the base of Mount Bremer and at Ida Point. A map showing the location of Evans Bay is shown in Figure 1.

Archaeological sites at Evans Bay were first reported by David Moore, who in 1971 undertook reconnaissance in the area (1971) and identified several archaeological sites, which he excavated and sampled from the surface in 1973 (Moore 1973, 1974, 1979: 13-150). Moore’s excavations at Ida Point at the extreme southeast of Evans Bay produced a radiocarbon date at a depth of between 30 and 40cm of 610 ± 80BP (ANU-1364) and an assemblage of quartz flakes, shell, cooking stones and part of an edge ground diorite axe head. Moore also mapped and collected from the surface of an extensive campsite between the beach and a saltwater billabong behind Evans Bay, took samples from an occupational horizon in a relic dune section near Ida Point, and recorded the freshwater spring at the base of Mount Bremer. Although he recorded and photographed two turtle lookout cairns at Port Lihou on Prince of Wales Island, and commented on the occurrence of stone arrangements in several other places, he did not explicitly discuss stone arrangements at Evans Point, although an adze which he believed to be a ‘Torres Strait type’ was located in the vicinity of Evans Point by one of his field assistants (Moore 1973: 8).

In October 2003 we undertook an intensive surface survey for archaeological sites in the vicinity of Evans Point, Cape York, recording the location of sites and features using twin Trimble Pro XLS differential GPS receivers tuned to the AMSA radio beacon on Horn Island. This intensive survey complimented previous surveys at Evans Bay and the surrounding east and north coasts of Cape York and its immediate islands by SMT as a field assistant to Greer in 1987 and 1988 (Greer 1995), by SMT for her own PhD fieldwork (McIntyre-Tamwoy 2000) and during ranger training exercises over the period 1989-1992, and more recent work by SMT recording traditional and ceremonial places for the Cape York Land Council and Aphudhama Lands Trust, and for the development of a Conservation Management Plan for Somerset historic site (McIntyre-Tamwoy Heritage Consultants 2004). One

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Figure 1 Map showing the location of Evans Bay and recorded stone arrangements.
striking feature of the survey was the very large number of stone cairns and several circular stone arrangements that were recorded at Evans Point on a rocky headland at the northermmost part of Evans Bay. At least 24 stone cairns and 6 stone circles along with a large and apparently stratified midden were recorded in an area of less than 1000 m² on this headland. Other stone circles and cairns were also noted in lower concentrations on an adjacent extension of Evans Point, and at Ida Point. A map of the recorded cairns and circles is shown in Figure 1, and photographs of the cairns and circles in Figures 2-4.

Description of the stone arrangements at Evans Point

Stone Circles

The recorded stone circles tend to be composed of walls of 1-2 courses of stones of between 25 cm² and 75 cm², although some with as many as 3 courses are evident. Tumbled down stones inside and around the perimeter of these circles suggest that they were probably greater in number than can now be discerned. The stone circles are approximately 2-3 m in diameter, and are contiguous with one another, with the exception of a single outlier circle behind the main series of stone arrangements on the headland, and small numbers of stone circles which were recorded at Ida Point (the stony point at the opposite end of Evans Bay) and on the northern ‘arm’ of Evans Point (see Figure 1). The majority of the circles are located on the seaward side of Evan’s Point, on a flat area below the main stony headland where the bulk of the stone cairns are located.

Stone cairns

The stone cairns range in size from a series of as few as 8 small stones of around 10-20 cm² piled together [forming a cairn of approximately 20 cm in height and 30 cm in diameter], to large piles of medium sized boulders of around 20-50 cm² forming a cairn up to 1.4 m in height and 1.5 m in diameter. With the exception of two, the cairns are all flat topped or dome topped in shape, with stones arranged so that they are relatively firmly packed together. Freshly tumbled or moved stones may be distinguished by greater levels of ‘grey’ oxidation and weathering on what had previously been the external exposed part of the stone, with a fresh appearance to the part of the stone which has not been exposed to the weather. Cairns were sorted into three size ranges to attempt to differentiate them. Small cairns are between 20 and 40 cm in height and diameter; medium cairns between 40 and 70 cm in height and diameter; and large cairns over 70 cm in height and...
diameter. Small cairns tend to be associated with large and medium sized cairns, in some cases occurring as circles of small piles around single or group of larger cairns. At least two groups of such arrangements of cairns could be discerned. A grouping of medium sized cairns was present on the eastern part of the headland.

Two of the largest cairns have clearly been recently ‘rebuilt’, and are peaked on the top, rather than displaying the flat or dome topped shape of the other cairns. While one of the cairns appeared to be entirely built of freshly tumbled together (rather than tightly packed) rocks showing many external stone surfaces with a lack of weathering and oxidation, the other appeared to have a base which was intact, with the top half of the cairn recently rebuilt. SMT had previously been shown the Evans Point site by a community elder (Mr Meun Lifu) in 1988 at which time there was no sign of disturbance to the site by tourists. Long term observations by SMT and local Aboriginal people since 1988 of disturbance to stone arrangements at the nearby Pajinka resort at Cape York suggested that these cairns had most likely been disassembled and ‘rebuilt’ by tourists (Figure 5), an activity which she had observed on several occasions to be encouraged by tour operators. Indeed, it was a general concern in the community with the high levels of disturbance to these sites evident over this period of observation since 1988, along with recent work recording associated turtle hunting-magic places which motivated the re-survey described in this paper.

Previous observations of stone cairns at Cape York

Early observations of stone cairns at Evans Bay and Cape York were made by members of the surveying voyage of the H.M.S Fly in 1844. Jukes (1847: 136ff) provides a description and two illustrations of a ‘native grave’ on Cape York Island.

On its northern side, about fifty feet from the sea, we found a native grave, on the brow of a small precipice. It consisted of a pile of skulls and bones, chiefly of turtle, but with a few that had belonged to a dugong. Most of the bones were very old, but some of the turtle were almost fresh, the shell still adhering to them. The pile was six feet long, four feet wide, and three feet high. It was surrounded by slabs of stone, and from the centre of it protruded a piece of bamboo about five feet long. Similar graves were found at one or two other points on the island, and one on a little bush islet some miles to the eastward. This one, however, was in a peculiarly picturesque and appropriate situation, a bleak and desolate spot, overhanging the sea, and well adapted for solemn and mournful reflections (1847: 137).

Jukes also reports that Macgillivray later excavated the mound and found ‘human bones belonging to more than one individual, but no individual, not even a complete skull’ (1847: 138) inside. Several years later Macgillivray and the crew of the H.M.S. Rattlesnake had a chance to discuss the function of this and similar stone cairns with Aboriginal and Islander people during their one month stay in the vicinity of Evans Bay, Cape York in 1848, and a two month stay in 1849. He noted,

There are some favourite look-out stations for turtle where the tide runs strongly off a high rocky point. At many such places, distinguished by large cairns of stones, bones of turtle, dugong &c., watch is kept during the season, and, when a turtle is perceived drifting past with the tide, the canoe is manned and sent into chase… One of these on Albany Rock is a pile of stones, five feet high and seven wide, mixed up with turtle’s and human bones, and, when I last saw it, it was covered with long trailing shoots of Flagellarea Indica placed there by a turtling party to ensure success, as I was told, but how was not explained. The human bones were the remains of a man killed there many years ago by a party of Kowaregas who took his head away with them. The mounds described and figured in Jukes’ Voyage of the Fly and considered by us at the time to be graves are merely the usual cairns at a look-out place for turtle (1852: 22).

Brierly’s diary and sketchbook from this same journey record in much greater detail a number of significant observations from key Gudang and Kaurareg informants about these turtle increase cairns and associated turtle hunting magic. David Moore’s edited transcription of Brierly’s diary, published as Islanders and Aborigines at
Cape York (1979) is a key source of these observations, along with the (unedited and marginally notated) diaries themselves (Brierly 1848-1850a) and Brierly’s published and unpublished field sketches (particularly Brierly 1848-1850b). On October 25th 1849, Brierly was shown an actively used turtle increase cairn on the top of a hill on Moebunum [Tree Island] near Albany Island. Brierly measured the cairn and produced a field sketch (Figure 7). He describes it as:

…composed of big stones below with the heads and other bones of turtles piled on top. Its height was about 4 feet [1.2 metres], the diameter of the base being about 2 yards [1.83 metres] diameter. Round the sides and near the top of the heap several (six) green branches were stuck…the long leaflets fluttering in the wind (Moore 1979: 87)

Near the top of the heap were… six green branches stuck. They appeared to be the head of a kind of palm, the long leaflets fluttering out in the wind. At about a third of the height of the pile, measuring from the tip, were six leaves from some description of palm, the shaft of the leaf being about 3 feet [91.5cm] in length, round with long leaflets standing out at right angles to the main stem. They were all fluttering in the strong breeze like a number of ribbons on a stick… above these and springing out from the heads on top of the heap were five long pieces of some kind of plant which runs along the ground… which… radiated out… only in such a direction as the natives would be likely to approach the point from the water. These creepers they call bodja (Moore 1979: 88-9).

Brierly’s sketch also accurately reproduces several small subsidiary stones around the main cairn on which were placed various items in different combinations including (fresh) turtle flesh, (old) turtle bone, shells, grass and a round stone, which he later describes using the generic word for magical objects,uperi (Moore 1979: 226).

During the course of his stay in Cape York, Brierly was able to record a number of other observations about turtle magic and its connection with these stone agu (as he was later informed they were called) in more detail. The green palm-like leaves attached to staffs (called tatarra in Gudang
and menellie in Kaurareg) that he had seen placed on the agu were also placed on the stern of the canoe ‘Bruan’ [which he recorded in several detailed sketches (see Figure 8) which were used as the basis for the canoes in Owen Stanley’s paintings such as ‘Native Huts, Evans Bay, Cape York (Mitchell Library, PXC 281 f.89)] during the soolah turtle season, at the end of which the tatarra would be removed from the canoe. Indeed, he records that by November 16th, 1849, these ornaments had all been removed from the canoes (Moore 1979: 112, 198). Barbara Thompson, an English woman who had been marooned and lived with the Kaurareg for several years and who was ‘rescued’ by the Rattlesnake, informed Brierly that a stone cairn which had been built by Europeans on Cape Cornwall, Prince of Wales Island, was also being used as a turtle lookout (Moore 1979: 153), and that in addition to the one measured by Brierly, such cairns also existed at Cape York Island. The placement of the turtle heads was ‘thought to bring more turtle about’ (Moore 1979: 168). Some men had magic paperbark bundles (marki mabarr) containing the tongues of head-hunted enemies and other magical objects, which would be anointed with turtle fat and tied to the bow of the canoe to give good luck during the hunt (Moore 1979: 184). Brierly also records that the soolah turtle were taboo to certain Kaurareg women from Muralag [Prince of Wales Island], but that the taboo was lifted when the women came across to mainland Cape York. These Kaurareg women were very keen to make trips to the mainland with their husbands during the turtle season so that they could feast on it (Moore 1979: 198).

Alfred Haddon recorded some of the ceremonies associated with what he terms ‘turtle processions’ (to distinguish them from what he considered to be ‘dances’ proper) at turtle platforms in the Torres Strait during his first visit to the Torres Strait in 1888-1889 (1893: 149ff). Other detailed observations of sacred stones, cairns, platforms and associated hunting magic in the Torres Strait and Cape York were recorded during the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Straits in 1898. He describes performances at Mabuiag, Dauar and Mer which involved a number of variations of a general left to right circular procession around a recently caught turtle or ritual platform. At Mabuiag, bamboo platforms (called agu like the stone platforms built by the Gudang on the mainland) were built on which the carapaces of turtles caught in the previous season were placed to cover a layer of palm leaves which sat on the platform. Large bullroarers (bigu) which had been stashed in the agu where whirled over the canoe prior to it setting off. When the men were expected to return, a man would ‘station himself on a hill to look out’ (1893: 150). When the hunters were seen returning the man would whir a small bullroarer (wainis), and those remaining in the village would know from the sound that they should prepare for the men’s return and to cook the
turtle. Before butchering the turtle the men would return to the agu and circle left to right around it, swinging both large and small bullroarers and rattles (padatrong). Haddon (1904: 334-5) also records a large granite boulder on Mabuia called a wiwai stone which was used in turtle increase and hunting magic rituals.

On Dauar, when a turtle was caught it was placed on a sand beach with its head between two carved boards (buar) attached to the top of which were long ropes which two men would hold, and accompanied by other men, would walk around the turtle from left to right singing (Haddon 1893: 150). A small drum (warrap) was beaten while the men circled the turtle. These boards were elaborately decorated, their decoration apparently including human bone, pearl shell inlay and cassowary feathers. In another place Haddon describes the way in which the skulls of successful hunters could be incorporated into the materials which were ritually deposited at turtle magic places to harness the skill of the spirit of the dead hunter (1935: 69). On Mer, the turtle was also placed on a sand beach on its back, and the men circled it three times left to right (1893: 151). On the first circle bullroarers were carried, and on the second and third circle, they were whirled while the men also beat their thighs with their hands. The men decorated their hair, armlets and belts with lislis leaves. Guur guar, the stem of a creeper was inserted into the cloaca of the turtle and pushed up and down while red ochre was spat on the turtle near the origins of each of its limbs. Finally, the men walked single file to a tree or post to which the lislis were fastened, after which they butcheted and cooked the turtle. An important Nam (turtle) Zogo, in the form of a male and female turtle made of turtleshell, was used in magical practices associated with increasing, or halting, the numbers of catches of turtle on Mer (Haddon 1908: 213).

Haddon also recorded the ritual use of a range of stone arrangements or ‘natural’ stone formations throughout the Eastern and Western Torres Strait Islands, including the wiwai mentioned above (1904: 335) and Waipem, a turtle shrine composed of a small anthropomorphic standing stone near to which were constructed bamboo shrines on Waier (1908: 216). Much of this material has been recently cited by McNiven (2003) in relation to stone arrangements in central Queensland, and McNiven and Feldman (2003) with reference to their excavation of a dugong hunting magic site composed of dugong bone on Pulu Islet near Mabuiaq Island. In the western Torres Strait Islands, agu platforms were constructed on canoes, to which the successive heads and carapaces of turtles caught during the hunting season were added to demonstrate the success of the crew in hunting (1904: 330-331), and ceremonies were undertaken in the Kwod both to increase the numbers of turtles, and to ensure success in the season’s hunting (1904: 333-334). Charms associated with turtle hunting magic included small stone and wooden carvings of turtles, and knapped quartz flakes stuck together with resin, representing two turtles copulating (1904: 333).

Are the stone arrangements at Evans Point turtle increase sites?

The stone cairns recorded at Evans Point appear to be similar in appearance to the agu described by Brierly, which prior to the turn of the nineteenth century were still being actively constructed and used by Aborigines at Cape York. The traditions associated with these agu, including leaving behind part of a catch as an offering, are still practiced and known to local people. Other places are still actively used. Aboriginal people from Injinoo recall the recent use of standing stones for increase ceremonies at Yanyura near Newcastle Bay.

For that turtle site you gotta go to the burial ground, break tree branch, beat them on the ground... ee got stone there. There where the stony place... then all the fish [turtle/dugong] go come. Yeah, down Escape River, Newcastle Bay there, got them burial ground there too. Belt them stone with them branch and get all good fishing. Ee big stony place (Mr Andrew Peters interviewed by Susan McIntyre-Tamwoy at Injinoo 15/01/04).

The main stone at Yanyura is the dugong increase stone, appropriate attention to which means that you don’t have to search for dugong, ‘when you go out in your dinghy they meet you half way’ (Mr Meun Lifu, pers comm. 06/04). For local Aboriginal people, turtle increase sites sit within a broader culturescape associated with a range of different turtle and dugong increase and good-luck hunting magic rituals. Many places associated with important hunting magic rituals are not marked with monuments which are visible to outsiders. For example, Christo Lifu recently (pers comm. January 2004) recounted how Gudang people make regular visits to a particular stone at Peak Point to the east of Evans Bay. The site is a ‘stoffles’ associated with the journey of a turtle and frog. Here people rub the ‘eye’ of the stone which represents the turtle for good luck, prior to setting off in dinghies to go hunting. Such hunting magic places and gestures should be distinguished from increase ritual proper, which is concerned with regenerating and continuing the existence of animal species, rather than ensuring individual success in the hunt (eg Berndt and Berndt 1985: 270ff).

We were able to relocate the agu sketched by Brierly on Tree Islet (Moebumin) in 1849 (see Figures 9-12), as well as the agu excavated by MacGillivray on Cape York Island in 1844 (Figure 13) during a fieldtrip in May-June 2004. We recorded the dimensions of the Tree Islet mound much as they were described by Brierly. While we did not excavate it, through the spaces between the stones in the cairn could be seen large shell decorations/offerings of trochus and baler shell, along with a small amount of fragmentary animal bone, probably turtle bone. The agu is located on the north side of the islet on its highest point, and is associated with a small midden containing oystershell, mudshell, trochus, nerita, knapped clam shell artefacts, and small quartz flakes. Similarly, the agu on Cape York Island is located on a high bluff to the north of the island, and is associated with a small midden and several smaller stone cairns and circles. After MacGillivray’s excavation it has been piled back to form a mound, giving the appearance of having been roughly tumbled together, rather than the closely packed nature of the Tree Islet cairn. The cairns at Evans Bay, while appearing in larger numbers, share many of the characteristics of these isolated stone agu, including their association with a nearby midden, and with smaller stone cairns and circles. The complex stone arrangements are also consistent with those recently excavated and reported by David et al (2004) on Badu Island. On this basis we suggest that Evans Point was a large turtle increase site associated with dozens of stone agu.
While the identification of Evans Point as a turtle increase site may seem obvious, there remains the task of explaining why Brierly himself did not identify these stone arrangements with turtle increase, despite having spent much time at Evans Bay and having been aware of the existence of stone cairns as turtle increase sites in other adjacent parts of the mainland and islands in the Torres Strait. Another curiosity is that Brierly does not mention the existence of stone ‘circles’ at either Evans Bay or Cape York, which prior to the mid 1970s, were a prominent feature of both headlands. While Moore does not discuss Evan’s Point explicitly, it appears marked as a ‘turtle lookout’ on his map of archaeological sites in northern Cape York and the surrounding islands in his PhD draft manuscript (1974), and in conversation with SMT in 2004, he recalled that these cairns were covered in turtle bone when he undertook his fieldwork in 1973 (pers comm. May 2004). We suggest the reason that Brierly did not identify Evans Point as a turtle lookout may be that many of the recorded agu occurred as single large cairns, and not in the large numbers recorded at Evans Point. Brierly’s notes on his only visit to Evans Point proper (the Rattlesnake expedition’s main shore based landings at Evans Bay were at Ida Point to the south where they dug a well, the crew sleeping aboard the ship and coming ashore for supplies and scientific investigations only) are instructive. He was aware of a group of Kaurareg who had arrived at Evans Bay for a meeting with local Gudang people who were camped behind Evans Point at the base of Mt Bremer, and was keen to go ashore and see this camp.

Pulled down and into a beach that lies between some rocks at the NW end of the beach, a very pretty place which I had not seen before [Evans Point]. About a dozen natives came down to meet us on the rocks as we landed…as I got out of the boat one of the natives seized my hand, guiding me with great care over the rocks which in this place are all tumbled together, calling out quickly and holding me tightly by the hand when I appeared to be stepping in the wrong direction, pointing to the proper path (Moore 1979: 72, our emphasis).

We think it significant that Brierly visited Evans Point some days before he had been shown the decorated and actively used turtle increase cairn on Tree Island. It is quite likely that the apparently undecorated cairns on what was a generally rocky headland would have been invisible to him as Aboriginal monuments before his having the single decorated cairn near Albany Island pointed out to him. Brierly was discouraged from visiting the camp on this occasion, and there were reports of ‘corroborees’ held over the preceding and following days which involved both Gudang and Kaurareg people. While Brierly was onshore, another of the sailors obtained a Kaurareg mask which had presumably been brought across for the ceremonies. The apparent anxiousness of the Aboriginal men who met Brierly at Evans Point and led him around the stones so that he did not disturb them, coupled with the presence of stone circles, suggests the site may have had a dual initiation/bora and increase function. The large number of cairns at this site and its dual function might be further accounted for by the fact that this was in important inter-group meeting place. Evans Bay was described extensively by early explorers and ethnographers as an important meeting place for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Indeed, it was on the
basis of these descriptions that Moore selected Evans Bay as a place to excavate a site in an attempt to document the changing social relationships of Islanders and Aborigines in the region through the archaeological record (1974). During the Rattlesnake’s two stays in the vicinity of Evans Bay, they encountered Aboriginal people from five different language groups, and Torres Strait Islanders from several different islands, including people from as far away as the outer Western Islands. There are also references to people from the Eastern Islands visiting Evans Bay, although in general people from the Eastern Torres Strait Islands only came as far south as Muri [Mount Adolphus Island] for trade with Aborigines and other Islanders (Moore 1978, 1979: 21). On the basis of this and the physical evidence we argue that Evans Point was an important ceremonial centre, and in conjunction with the stone arrangements at Cape York, was used for both large group increase ceremonies and possibly for inter-Aboriginal and Islander initiation ceremonies.

Tourist cairns and stone arrangements: colonialism, mimesis and ‘erasure’

In the final part of this paper we want to try to account for the archaeological evidence of the disassembly and rebuilding of Aboriginal stone cairns at Evans Point (along with the disassembly of stone circles to build stone cairns at Cape York) by explorers and tourists. We argue that the apparent deconstruction and rebuilding of stone cairns at Evans Bay documents a series of responses to key colonial anxieties surrounding the construction of stone monuments by Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, and the meaning for this demarcation of space for the colonial project as a whole. This part of the paper continues previous work by one of us on the erasure of heritage places in relation to the archaeology of Christianity in Cape York (McIntyre-Tamwoy 1999).

The dislocation and disassociation of Aboriginal people from their land was (and is) a very necessary part of the colonial project in Australia, as elsewhere (e.g. Pels 1997: 173). As Thomas notes, colonial discourses require the construction of foundational moments of conquest which assert themselves as a ‘pure beginning’ (1999: 36), or at least, as a ‘new’ beginning, in emphasising a succession from indigenous to settler land occupation (1999: 109, see also 1994 and 1991). Monuments associated with the occupation and ownership of land by Aboriginal people

![Figure 12 Site plan of the Tree Islet cairn.](image)

Figure 13 Matthew Sagigi at the stone cairn excavated by MacGillivray on Cape York Island, showing Eborac Island (to the southeast) in the background.
were, therefore, a key symbolic threat to the development of an Australian colonial nation-state. Russell and McNiven (1998) have noted the ways in which stone circles near Mt Elephant in Victoria were represented during the nineteenth century as European Neolithic megaliths. They set this representation within the context of a range of other discursive colonial disassociations of Indigenous people from archaeological sites associated with their ancestors, including the famous assertions that the ruins of Great Rhodesia in Zimbabwe and the Mississippi mound sites in southeastern U.S.A. were constructed by non-indigenes, as the sites were 'too complex' to be constructed by their indigenous inhabitants. They note that such discursive representations were a way of legitimising colonial claims to land which was fundamental to the process of colonisation as a whole.

Critical to this process was the construction of a new cultural landscape filled with familiar historical and spiritual meaning...[by] appropriating Aboriginal sites as European heritage and appropriating Aboriginal people as European ancestors... Dispossessing the indigenes and (re)possessing their land was legitimated by constructing an identity of the colonial Self as antithetical yet derivative of the colonized other (Russell and McNiven 1998: 296, original emphasis).

Today, the disassembly of stone cairns and circles at Cape York is actively encouraged by tour operators, who suggest that tourists might wish to add a stone to cairns at Cape York as part of the ‘tradition’ of those who have been to ‘the tip’ before them. Evans Point can be reached along a coastal walk from Pajinka. This was encouraged during the life of the resort (which is currently closed) and is the most common method of access to the bay by tourists, as the only vehicle access track is very rough. Tourists who we spoke with in October 2003 felt that adding a stone to the now prominent cairns at ‘the tip’ helped mark their grand tour to Cape York, and meant that they left a mark of their adventure behind them for others to see. It helped them feel part of a tradition of travel to ‘the tip’ by other settler Australians and European explorers. The tourists were unaware that they were disassembling the now much less obvious remains of Aboriginal stone arrangements to build their own cairns when they did this. However, the spread of this practice to Evans Point is interesting as here the Aboriginal stone arrangements are much more prominent, and as recently as the early 1990s were undisturbed by tourists. While it might be tempting to see this as an accidental form of site destruction, the situation today reflects a long period of contestation as to whether the stone arrangements at Cape York were Aboriginal remains at all, and the long-term active destruction of stone circles and cairns by former tour operators and managers of the resort at Cape York to facilitate development (Pajinka is now managed by the Pajinka Board, an Injinoo community organisation) since the 1970s. We suggest the roots of this erasure lie much deeper, in the colonial tradition of mimicry of Indigenous icons and images within the colonial as a way of subsuming, and ultimately erasing, traces of Aboriginal land ownership and Aboriginal people’s presence in the landscape.

We have already mentioned above the ‘excavation’ of a turtle increase cairn by Macgillivray in 1846. This and the later erasure of stone circles and cairns should be placed within a broader context of the ‘tradition’ of the acquisition of objects of power by Europeans to destabilise the power base of Aborigines and Islanders as a tool for colonisation of the region. For example, the Reverend John J.E. Done, who worked in the Torres Strait for the Australian Board of Missions over the period 1915-1926, recounts how the baptismal font in St Mary’s church at Mabuiag rests on a pillar and two large stones which are the ‘head’ of Kwoiam’s mother and a prison stone (which, being very heavy, used to be carried around the village for punishment) respectively (Done 1987: 17-18).

It was appropriate that these two stones, so intimately connected with the dark times, as pre-Christian days are called, should be used in the making of the font, the gateway to the Christian life. They now form the base from which the concrete pedestal arises (Done 1987: 18).

Similarly, Haddon (1935: 71) recounts the story of members of a trading firm stationed at Nagiri removing Nagi, a large standing stone which represented a powerful spirit-being, from his resting place in the scrub, and setting him upright near the beach to frighten the Islanders some time prior to the turn of the nineteenth century. The mimicry and assumption of the characteristics of Indigenous spirit powers by Missionaries for the Christian God formed an important tool in the ‘missionisation’ of Cape York and the Torres Strait.

Michael Taussig’s Mimesis and Alterity (1993) provides a useful commentary on the twin concepts of mimesis (imitation) and alterity (difference) in the construction of settler-colonial relations, which might help to situate the imitation of Aboriginal cairns by tourists and tourism operators in Cape York within the colonial project as a whole. One of us has previously cited this work with reference to the imitation of stone artefacts in glass by Aboriginal people in Australia (Harrison 2003). His book begins with a puzzle: why are the Indigenous Cuna (Panama) curing figurines, muchukana, described by the Swedish ethnologist Baron Erland Nordenskiold in An historical and ethnological survey of the Cuna Indians, carved in the form of Europeans, complete with settler colonial dress? The Figures, the material embodiment of Cuna helper-spirits, are almost always carved in such a manner as to represent non-Indians and non-Indian demons or spirits.

Why are they Other, and why the Colonial Other?... What magic lies in this [wooden effigy of a “European type”], sung to power in a language I do not understand?... Something trembles in the whole enterprise of analysis and knowledge – making here: the whole anthropological trip starts to eviscerate... if I take the figurines seriously, it seems that I am honour bound to respond to the mimicry of my-self in ways other than the defensive manoeuvre of the powerful by subjecting it to scrutiny as yet another primitive artefact, grist to the mill of Euro-American anthropology. The very mimicry corrodes the alterity by which my science is nourished. For now too I am part of the object of study. The Indians have made me alter to my self (1993: 7-8).

Taussig ties the myths of ‘first contact’ to the post-colonial difficulty of separating the ‘Self’ from its ‘Alter’. He uses this notion and the obsession of the colonial ‘West’
with mimetic machines such as the phonograph and the camera to explain the combination of fear and pleasure that such machines create when combined with the reflections of the ‘West’ as seen through the eyes and bodies of its ‘Others’ (1993: 252). His own curiosity about the ‘European type’ carved into a wooden effigy to be used in a totally ‘Other’ context is itself linked to the mimetic facility in post-colonial relations; a ‘mimetic excess’ creates a ‘reflexive awareness as to the mimetic faculty… that takes one into the magical power of the signifier to act as if it were indeed real’ (1993: 254-255). Mimicry, as well as the excessive obsession with it, is an integral and pervasive aspect of colonial relations. It is within this ‘artful combination’, a set of rapid oscillations between the forms of mimicry and its flip side alterity, that an unsettled and unsettling interpretation in constant movement with the self (which Taussig terms a ‘nervous system’) is produced (1993: 237; see also 1991).

It seems ironic that even while Brierly was recording the active construction and use of stone agu, that he gives prominence to a story recounted by Barbara Thompson that the stone agu at Cape Cornwall was actually constructed by Europeans (see Moore 1979: 153). The mimetic impulse seems clearly apparent in the removal of stones from Aboriginal stone arrangements to rebuild similarly shaped tourist cairns in Cape York. But in this case there is a darker motive — the erasure of the stone arrangements as Indigenous monuments through their imitation and incorporation into a non-Indigenous tourist tradition. This erasure is performed in a particularly insidious way, as it is not necessary to physically demolish all of the stone cairns and circles to erase them. Instead, through the transformation of one or two stone cairns into a phenomenon of white tourism related activity, the remaining Aboriginal stone arrangements are effectively absorbed by the casual viewer or tourist, who now views all cairns as tourist cairns, effectively erasing them as Aboriginal monuments. The tourist-built stone cairns now dominate the landscape at the tip of Cape York, drawing the visitor’s gaze away from the other less obvious traces of stone circles and cairns at both Cape York and Evans Bay (see Figure 14), but even if the visitor was to notice them, they appear to be simply (yet another) smaller version of the tourist cairns. They are erased through mimicry. This apparently simple and incidental form of site destruction should be seen as a colonial act of effacement which seeks to erase, through mimicry, prior traces of Indigenous land occupation and ownership.

Discussion and Conclusions

With reference to the analysis of stone arrangements in central Queensland, McNiven (2003: 338, citing McNiven and Feldman 2003) has recently observed the absence of studies in Australia which seek to understand ‘indigenous seascapes as spiritscapes using archaeological sites’. In this paper we have attempted to read these stone arrangements as part of an Indigenous culturescape, as well as reading their later disturbance ‘against the grain’ to understand how such sites are contested in colonial contexts. We suggest that analysing Indigenous stone arrangements also requires researchers to understand the palimpsest nature of such sites, which may include their ongoing and transformed ritual use by Aboriginal people, phases of abandonment and reinterpretation, as well as acts of colonial inquiry and effacement such as those discussed in this paper.

The large quantity of stone cairns at Evans Point suggests it functioned as an important turtle increase centre, which possibly involved large groups of Aborigines and Islanders in joint ritual activities. Recent partial demolition and rebuilding of mimetic stone cairns by tourists can be related to colonial anxieties regarding Aboriginal stone monuments and their symbolic power for writing indigenous occupation and ownership across the landscape. Citing Taussig’s work on the pervasiveness of the mimetic impulse in colonial relations, we see these actions as an attempt to erase this remarkable series of stone monuments through mimesis and absorption, motivated by an underlying colonial desire to assert non-indigenous exploration and its re-enactment as part of the settler tourist experience in Cape York as a foundational moment of conquest, while legitimising broader colonial claims to land.

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Figure 14 The tourist cairns at Cape York now dominate the landscape, particularly when viewed from the sea.


Macgillivray, J. 1852 Narrative of the Voyage of the H.M.S. Rattlesnake, Commanded by the Late Captain Owen Stanley, R.N. R.R.S &c. during the Years 1846-1850 Including Discoveries and Surveys in New Guinea, the Louisiade Archipelago, etc. To which is Added the Account of Mr. E.B. Kennedy’s Expedition for the Exploration of the Cape York Peninsula. London: T. and W. Boone.


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