Kangaroo Island sealers and their descendants: Ethnic and gender ambiguities in the archaeology of a creolised community

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Abstract

Our understandings of the European-Aboriginal contact period are restricted by our limited engagement with and interrogation of the categories used for analysis. Dividing the past into Indigenous and non-Indigenous, Aboriginal and invader and so on, fails to reveal the complexity and nuances of cross-cultural, negotiated encounters and the emergence of new social formations and identities. Furthermore the ascription of ethnicity to historical actors generally relies on late twentieth (early twenty-first) century conceptions of what it means to be Aboriginal which are not necessarily valid for the period under consideration.

Introduction

This paper was inspired by Walshe and Loy’s (2004) request for feedback and debate on the analysis of a flaked adze made from a late nineteenth century telegraph insulator found on Kangaroo Island, South Australia. In the spirit of that scholarship I offer the following discussion. Historical studies, including historical/contact archaeology, tend to be dominated by binaristic terminology including male and female, men and women, native and newcomer, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, invader and traditional owner, victim and victor, slave and slaver, and so on. Such dichotomies seamlessly lend themselves to the development of interpretive paradigms such as invasion and resistance which categorise the world into a black and white comprehensible pseudo-reality, by simplifying and homogenising complexity, variability and uncertainty (e.g. see Reynolds 1989; cf. Godwin 2001). However, such dichotomies are based on epistemological categories that do not necessarily resonate for the period being studied. Furthermore there has been a lack of attention paid to the two-way and often reciprocal nature of cultural interaction, with the general perception being that European culture (objects, materials and ideas) entered Aboriginal society, while little influence was exerted on the culture of the colonisers. Needless to say, I am referring here to interactions that involved material or conceptual exchange which categorise the world into a black and white comprehensible pseudo-reality, by simplifying and homogenising complexity, variability and uncertainty, and in particular the complex cross-cultural history of the sealing era (such as on Kangaroo Island) and its impact into the latter part of the nineteenth century, presents an ideal opportunity to explore some of these issues. One humble adze might just reveal to us some of that complexity.

Contact and encounter

I recognise the oft-used term ‘contact’ is problematic not least because is homogenises a range of complex and often geographically and chronologically context-specific events into a ‘concentrated moment of historical time’ (Torrence and Clarke 2000:13; see also Colley and Bickford 1996:16-17). In this paper, contact is used to refer to the very earliest European-Indigenous interactions. Torrence and Clarke eloquently suggest ‘negotiated outcomes’ (2000:16) as the appropriate analytical framework. Negotiation is a conceptual category that underpins cross-cultural and inter-cultural contact – negotiation explicitly implies a two-way exchange.

Negotiated encounters leading to negotiated outcomes provides the basis for creolisation theory, popular in American and Caribbean archaeological studies (see chapters in Cusick 1998; Thomas 1990; Deagan 1983). Creolisation theory has, however, been much less commonly explored within Australian archaeology. Its importance should not be understated as it offers ‘an alternative approach to understanding the cultural interactions during colonization’ (Birmingham 2000:362).

Creolisation theory: models circumstances in which cultural resistance takes innovative and creative forms by adopting much of what is relevant and useful from the incoming, retaining many elements of what is traditional, and then creating a new vigorous blend or hybrid culture involving speech, technology, music, art and religion, craft and institutions (Birmingham 2000:362).

Within Australian contact history/archaeology, creolisation theory has tended to be applied to mission and other sites of interaction that post-date the contact period. Although Birmingham’s ground breaking work has attempted to use creolisation theory it has not so much provided an opportunity to develop a new paradigm; but rather a new name for the accommodation model (see Russell 2001a, 2001b for a detailed discussion of the resistance/accommodation paradigm). This has led to an accommodation/creolisation model that provides an explanatory framework for materials/ideas travelling from the ‘newcomers’ to the ‘natives’. Although Birmingham’s work is of immense value, I use the term and concept of creolisation in a very different manner.

This paper is drawn from a larger project in which I am exploring the dialectical processes of colonisation, which considers the movement of ideas, materials, language and even identities, back and forth between the categories of coloniser and colonised, ultimately challenging the very categories themselves (cf. Singleton 1998:178). Importantly, I argue that careful definition of terms emphasises that the nature of contact was neither one sided nor exclusively controlled by the colonisers (see also Godwin 2001; McNiven 2001; McBryde 2000). Birmingham, working in an archaeological context, notes contact in settler colonies is often characterised as a ‘mostly unequal struggle between invaders empowered with superior technology, ideology and language, and the invaded who, armed only with an appropriate lifestyle and

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familiarity with local conditions, reacted by resistance’ (2000:360). Recent archaeological research has attempted to engage in a meaningful way with the previous mono-dimensional readings of contact and in particular deconstruct resistance as it relates to settler-colonies (e.g. Adams 1989; Cusick 1998; Deagan 1990; Colley 2000, 2002; Rogers and Wilson 1993; Rubertone 1989, 1996; Torrence and Clarke 2000). In each of these examples researchers have shown that cultural interaction and contact is invariably a complex dialogic process, whether one side nor another entirely directs or commands.

There is no doubt that from an archaeological perspective the impact of contact is often difficult to assess. Aboriginal people grappled with the newcomers as they attempted to incorporate them into their material and spiritual worlds (McNiven and Russell 2002). Some have argued that the application of ‘traditional’ techniques to new materials can be interpreted as a form of resistance, a maintenance of traditional activities (see Birmingham 1992; Farnsworth 1992; Leone and Potter 1987; Singleton 1998). However, trade and exchange were important mechanisms for establishing and maintaining alliances in a process, Nicholas Thomas (1991) calls ‘entanglement’. Each entangled object needs to be understood in terms of the social relationships it mediates.

**Kangaroo Island**

Sealers from a broad range of background first settled Kangaroo Island in the early 1800s (Cumpston 1970). Categorising the men as European of course, simplifies and homogenises, as some came from America, others from Britain and elsewhere. Some of the sealers brought with them Aboriginal (Pallawah) women from Tasmania and shortly after arriving were joined by women from Aboriginal tribes on the adjacent mainland (mainly Ngarrindjerri). During the first decades of the nineteenth century a society developed on Kangaroo Island that was an amalgam of newcomer and Aboriginal. The women raised children and worked on the sealskins preparing them for sale. They also supplemented their families’ diets with hunting and gathering. They took part in hunting the seals using their traditional waddies, which the men also took to hunting and gathering. They took part in hunting the seals etc (see Campbell and Noone 1943; James 2002). If we were to use the traditional paradigms for assessing the archaeology of Kangaroo Island we might be moved to suggest that the stone tools found around the sealers’ camps were made by Aboriginal women resisting their servitude and maintaining their cultural traditions. This is the subtext of many of the archaeological interpretations. Indeed very little exploration is given to alternate views as most archaeologists have assumed (unproblematically) that the women were responsible for manufacture (and probable use) of the stone and glass scrapers which are found associated with these sites (Campbell and Noone 1943; Draper 1999; Harvey 1941; Marsden 1991; De Leuven 1998).

Kangaroo Island and other sealing communities provide the opportunity to explore the process of creolisation in which ‘indigenous and adopted cultural elements blend[ed] into a new mixed culture, of extreme vigour, which differs from its predecessors’ (Birmingham 2000:362). Using this model, and arguing for ambiguity, I would like to consider the possibility that the implements (and hence the archaeology of the period) are not so easily explained, not least because we do not know which members of these new communities made them or who used them. The women might well have made and used the stone artefacts. Early European observers in Tasmania recorded Aboriginal women working with stone (Roth 1899:151; Robinson 1834 cited in Plomley 1966:897) and it would appear that there was no cultural prohibition for women using stone tools. However, in the new context of Kangaroo Island sealing community, it is equally possible that the women made but did not use the artefacts or perhaps they even taught their
‘husbands’ the techniques for stone knapping. One could also tend similar arguments for knapped glass tools. Did the men make these items, or the women? Were the artefacts used by or made by their children? In which case what ethnic designation should we ascribe to the objects? In addition, perhaps a much more important intervention is to ask why we would want to ascribe an ethnicity at all? Rather than label the objects Aboriginal (if they were made and used by the women) or European (if they were made and used by the men) it may well be more useful to consider these artefacts as belonging to a new creolised category that of, for the want of more appropriate terms hybrid or creolised.

A creolised object from a creolised society

It is indeed exciting that Walshe and Loy report the discovery of a telegraph insulator flaked to form an adze, used for working wood, which had been hafted using an unidentified resin (which was definitely neither Xanthorrhoea nor Spinifex) (2004:38). The adze must post-date 1876 if it was collected on Kangaroo Island (as this was the year when the telegraph was installed), or 1871 if it was secured from the mainland when the telegraph inched its way through South Australia. Walshe and Loy (2004: 39) designate the adze ‘Indigenous’:

the presumption around Indigenous versus non-Indigenous origin [they mean modification and use] is drawn purely from the weight of evidence for Indigenous use of introduced materials such as glass and ceramics and to manufacture traditional tools against the scant evidence for non-Indigenous use of the same materials, post-contact.

Yet interpreting an absence of evidence (in the historical record) as a mirror of the past is conceptually restrictive given that a key aim of historical archaeology is to explore the omissions and contradictions of the historical record. I would argue that this object perhaps better than any other epitomises hybridity or creolisation. However I would question the label ‘Indigenous’. As I have observed above it is virtually impossible to tease apart Kangaroo Island society into its constituent racial, gender and class elements based on twenty-first century’s notions of each category. Furthermore I suggest that such attempts to break down the society into its preformation constituents of Aboriginal and European ignores the reality that within a very short time of arriving on the island this relatively new social entity would have undergone substantial change. Concurrent with this transition I suggest that the identities of the social agents would have been likewise in flux. As a corollary the material culture (and indeed the people) of Kangaroo Island at this time and place similarly resists the essentialising categories of race – Aboriginal or European and for that matter male and female. Indeed very little exploration is given to alternate views as most archaeologists have assumed (unproblematically) that the women were responsible for manufacture (and probable use) of the stone and glass scrapers which are found at these sites.

In arguing for a creolised society, I am not suggesting that the Pallawah women gave up their identity as Aboriginal women but those aspects of their identity in particular that which relates to their daily lives can be considered to be creolised. Early settler George W. Walker noted, of Aboriginal women living with Bass Strait sealers, that they were not heard to speak English and they continued to practice their ‘ancient customs’ (cited in Plomley 1987:282). Walker referred to the women dancing naked and practising their traditional rituals. The Pallawah women living on Kangaroo Island most likely maintained similar traditional activities, possibly out of sight of their European ‘husbands’, perhaps even doing so while undertaking hunting excursions. Importantly, the theoretical construction of a creolised society should not be seen as replacing all aspects of the constituent cultures. To the contrary, creolised societies such as that suggested for Kangaroo Island were based around community members expanding their cultural repertoire for the purposes of the new community. Kangaroo Island sealing communities included Europeanised Aboriginal women as much as they included Aboriginalised European men.

Clearly much of what I propose to explore is speculative and perhaps even risks being labelled unanswerable, however, by not asking these complex questions we risk replicating simplistic dichotomous narrativist histories. By failing to explore the undecided or ambiguous within archaeology we are almost certainly condemned to reproducing binaristic paradigms. Furthermore, this simple binarism lacks historical specificity as the women’s lives would have undergone significant change throughout the up to 40 years they worked and lived with the men. Our twenty-first century understandings of the meaning of Aboriginality are based on identity politics and debate which emerged in the mid-part of the twentieth century. For many (but by no means all), Aboriginality is a category of exclusivity, it is of its very nature binaristic and definitive (see Anderson 1997; Langton 1981, 1988). Elsewhere I have discussed at length that not all identity is exclusive, stable or authoritative (Russell 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2002, forthcoming 2005) and have explored the possibility of new identity positions which reject the definitive nature of the binarism of black or white (cf: Anderson 1997; Papastergiades 1995). Given the acknowledgment that identity positions are utterly context specific and absolutely modern then we must note that there is simply no evidence that the definitive identity paradigm (of black or white/Aboriginal or European) can be extended back in time to the early or mid nineteenth century.

Conclusion

Australia was, for most of its history, readily divided into the categories of coloniser and colonised: European and Aboriginal. As such, these racial/ethnic categories do have some crude meaning as signifiers of cultural difference. However at times these categories become misleading. The boundaries around the native and the newcomer were, in some places, vague, ambiguous, context specific and most importantly, also unstable. Interpreting the archaeological materials from sites that date to this phase present a great challenge to the archaeologist. However these materials also present us with a unique opportunity to explore a set of cross-cultural interactions, which produced a hybridised and composite mix of cultural traits. Care needs to be taken not to privilege the mediation of cultural difference – we also need to recognise that Kangaroo Island in the post-contact period represents a new society modified, blended with aspects from several other groups. Perhaps by developing theoretical models which are sufficiently fluid, so as to account for a range of
possibilities, we might approach a more comprehensive understanding of the past.

Acknowledgments

Ian McNiven read this paper and made very useful comments as did the anonymous referees. Rebe Taylor and others who have written on Kangaroo Island continue to inspire debate. To this I would add Kerriyn Walshe and Tom Loy for stimulating and requesting discourse. The arguments in this paper represent a much condensed and distilled version of a chapter in the book Beyond identification? The Archaeology of Plural and Changing Identities, edited by Eleanor Conlin Casella and Chris Fowler, Plenum Press (2005).

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Australian Archaeology, Number 60, 2005


