



## Lamalama people and objects: the location and sustainability of indigenous heritage

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The paper discusses ways of thinking about heritage, and draws on research undertaken between Australian Indigenous people, the Lamalama of Cape York Peninsula and Museum Victoria in the city of Melbourne. It argues for a view of heritage in which emotions play a primary part. In current conceptualizations, heritage is thought to include the intangible investments and associations people make in relation to objects, and in this paper museum artifacts are invoked as part of its corpus. The role of museums and their relationship to source communities is thus considered, along with the idea that heritage is not a singular entity, but able to be thought of as inclusive of collaborations towards shared meaning. The paper suggests the human investments that create heritage status around objects may be localized and specific, but temporal, spatial and historical transitions further condition how such status is interpreted. In this context affective responses to objects are shown to be important to conceptualizations of heritage. Museums, broadly understood, are shown to provide a significant site for these reformulations of meaning and status. Finally, the paper briefly comments on the importance of both practice and interpretation to the sustainability of cultural heritage and heritage management regimes.

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### Introduction

The discussion in this paper argues for a view of heritage that includes both the emotional investments made in objects as well as the contexts and processes through which these occur, and draws on evidence from a recent Australian museum-based research project. It focuses on 'heritage' as a set of values embedded in cultural practice, and is not primarily concerned with the array of state-sanctioned professional practices through which a variety of objects might be conserved (Harrison 2010; 2012). It considers the cultural practices and responses of a group of Australian Aboriginal people, with particular regard to their participation in a project by which they were able to extend their relationship to their past through access to certain museum materials of cultural importance to them. These objects can be described as heritage materials, but the current framing of 'heritage' as expressed through globally-applied conventions for the management of cultural materials and practices continues to raise questions about the nature of such cultural property. Smith (2007, cited in Candlin 2012) has argued that heritage is not confined to objects but involves negotiations of value and identity, and that museums are among the places such processes occur. I similarly argue the ways in which people interact with and use museums can be seen as an incontrovertible part of cultural practice, incorporating a diverse range of activities and attachments to what both we and they interpret as heritage objects. Clearly, museums have been part of the colonial endeavour and Pratt's (1992) idea of the contact zone, when applied to such spaces of imperial encounter, emphasizes the way in which "subjects get constituted in and by their relations to each other". Yet as Clifford (1997) has demonstrated, they are also sites for reworking the cultural disjunctions that have resulted from colonialism. This notion has been expanded by Kratz and Karp (2006) who developed the concept of "museum frictions" as the social technology which "incorporates the idea of the museum as a varied and often changing set of practices, processes and interactions". Kratz and Karp's intention was to shift the analytical focus away from the institutional boundaries implied in the idea of the museum as an emplaced zone (Kratz and Karp 2006, p.2).

The paper is therefore most concerned with both heritage as a matter of dynamic practice, and ways in which this was revealed through research into the Donald Thomson Collection held by Museum Victoria in Melbourne, Australia. The particular group of Indigenous people involved are the Lamalama of

Cape York Peninsula, and I provide a short introduction to them below, which describes something of their history and experience as explanation for their interest in the Thomson Collection. The paper argues for a view of heritage as pertaining to specific cultural practice, as well as the broader set of meanings and processes evoked in the interaction between people and their interpretations of varying kinds of objects of significance to them. The argument of this paper is therefore that heritage is a result of meaning-making by people in collaboration with each other, whereas the objects that are the focus of these processes are its manifest tokens: without their human investments, they are simply objects, and as demonstrated in this discussion and in reflection of Harrison's (2012) views, do not represent a fixed canon of universal values. Even within a single source community, their value can be mutable. In general, the notion of heritage implies the existence of multiple layers of meaning and importance, and I therefore also suggest the importance the Lamalama invest in tokens of their past and their broader significance as part of the national estate are not competing values. In this context, the role played by the museum is one of mediating across categories of meaning as part of the work of management and curation.

### **Heritage, Museums and Memory**

The idea of heritage is also bound to notions of memory and memorialisation, and the literature on memory has shown that remembering and forgetting are complementary processes in human experience (e.g., Forty and Küchler 1999; Harrison 2012). By actively cultivating some memories, we choose to forget others, and it is this process of revisiting and re-evaluating the past that assists us to make sense of our lives. Linked to these ideas also is how we deal with absence. Mack (2003, p.115) has made the point that "in absence memory finds its most impassioned and most fertile ground": the lack of things makes the memory of them more important. Museums provide us with the opportunity to revisit the absent places of memory and experience, and to make sense of the present. These ideas are fundamental to Lamalama experience, as they are currently undergoing significant social change as a result of loss, while seeking ways to retain and continue cultural practices of importance to them.

This raises questions about the representational nature of heritage, which as Harrison notes (2012) is connected to ideas about universal value and what is being categorized when we talk about heritage. In pointing out that heritage values are ascribed, not intrinsic, a fact brought to our attention over recent decades by the increased recognition of a diversity of social and cultural voices, Harrison has suggested that approaches to heritage must "be flexible and change with time" (Harrison 2012, p.8-9). Indigenous people and other source communities are among the diverse voices that have contributed to our current re-evaluations of the meaning of heritage and the cultural practice of such groups more recently encapsulated as 'intangible heritage' in global approaches to its management. Museums are among the institutions that have participated in this reformulation of meaning and purpose. Museums typically contain heritage materials of various kinds and have historically been seen, at least popularly, as cultural storehouses whose primary purpose is to perform a public education function (Conaty, 2003). This perception of the role of museums is changing, and certainly with regard to Indigenous<sup>1</sup> cultural heritage in Australia, museum curators and others have embraced a broader view of the role and functions of museums.

The project I discuss here brought together the Lamalama, curators at Museum Victoria (MV), Melbourne, and university-based researchers to work on materials from the Donald Thomson Collection, the most important collection of materials of heritage significance to the Lamalama held by an Australian museum. The Lamalama have sustained an interest in the collection over several decades. This interest continues despite the deaths of a number of significant, knowledgeable community leaders over the last few years, placing younger people somewhat unexpectedly into positions of cultural authority. The sharpening of focus caused by this current intergenerational change has demonstrated that for the Lamalama, heritage is a matter of everyday practice. It resides in the history, memory and experience of individuals as much as in material objects, although differentially interpreted at times. The paper therefore goes on to discuss the implications of research on heritage materials in the cultural context of perceptions of the world as a humanised landscape, as it is understood by Australian Indigenous people such as the Lamalama (Rigsby, 1981), replete with associations and meanings that transcend any separation between the natural features of the environment and the sentience that exists within it. This includes ancestors, regionally referred to in English as the Old People, who inhabit the landscape and interact with the living, as well as a variety of other supernatural forms of being. In this context, objects made and used by the Old People make transitions across time and place, assuming differing categories of meaning that depend on their cultural and temporal location. While perhaps never entirely losing their status as cultural tokens, the associations that accrue across these transitions result in a range of affective responses.

### **Australian Indigenous people and heritage**

The objects in the Donald Thomson Collection range from artefacts and photographic images and documents, including Thomson's field notes. How we understand and value their status as heritage is enriched by the views of people such as the Lamalama, for whom their representative power is both complex and changeable. Many of the artefacts in the Thomson Collection that were central to the project were once mundane objects, the original purposes and functions of which have been modified by their duration within the museum. Lamalama people expressed the view that the project offered them an opportunity to interact with the artefacts, thus in the process instigating a fresh set of meanings and

memories, and new contexts of association with them. By examining these transitions, I hope to offer some insight into the role of museums in maintaining the complex sets of heritage value of objects in their collections. I suggest these values are firstly ones of personal connection for the Lamalama, but also include their perceptions of the value of the museum in its continuing role as a repository of Indigenous cultural materials. This first requires consideration of current usage of the concept of intangible heritage and why it is important in Australian experience, particularly that of Aboriginal people; as Candlin (2012) has shown with regard to experience in the UK, ideas about the nature and value of heritage may vary considerably.

Notions of heritage no longer simply reference emplaced, monumental, or immovable objects, evidenced in 2003 through supplementation of the relevant United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) convention, the World Heritage Convention. Hafstein (2004, p. iii) notes this instrument, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (CSICH) was "a long time coming", with calls for this kind of instrument occurring from at least the early 1970s. The Convention defines intangible cultural heritage, in part, as:

the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity... (UNESCO, 2003).

This heritage, the CSICH notes, is manifested in phenomena such as oral traditions and expressions, including language; social practices, including rituals; "knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe"; and traditional craftsmanship (UNESCO 2003). Given this, Indigenous cultures around the world are obviously subject to the protective terms of the Convention, and as Smith (2010, p.11) notes about countries with Indigenous populations such as the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, heritage values are of vital importance to both national identity and international perceptions of those identities. So much so, she suggests, that the Indigenous heritage of these countries acts as "a fundamental draw for international tourism". For example, in Australia this results in around 80 per cent of international visitors who leave the country having had "some kind of experience or interaction with Indigenous culture" (Smith 2010, p.11). Quite apart from any localised issues of heritage management that are implicated in that scenario, this fairly startling fact does frame contemporary perceptions of Australian Indigenous culture.

One obvious question that arises is the percentage of Australia's resident national population that could claim to also have had some "experience or interaction" with Indigenous culture. Australia's history as a former British colony and the attendant impacts on its Indigenous populations is well-documented (e.g., Rowley, 1970; Broome, 1982; Reynolds, 1982). Although Indigenous people are residents of cities and towns across the country, they constitute a small part of the national population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). Currently, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) estimates the total Indigenous population at 517,000 people, or 2.5% of the total Australian population of over 22 million people, based on data from the 2006 national census.<sup>ii</sup> This contrasts with estimates of Australia's Indigenous population as being at around one million people at the time of British contact in the late eighteenth century, and is a sobering reminder of the impacts of colonisation, which historically included officially enforced removals of children from their families and numerous other forms of mistreatment.

In 2008, the Labor Prime Minister of the day, Kevin Rudd, formally apologised to the "Stolen Generations" – those Indigenous people forcibly removed as a result of government policy – which brought Indigenous people once more into the national imagination, after a little over a decade of conservative federal governance in which Indigenous issues were often regarded as deeply problematical. During that time, hard-fought Indigenous rights and institutions were whittled away. Despite a national policy of reconciliation with its Indigenous people, bi-partisan support for racial tolerance<sup>iii</sup> and recognition of native title rights, this period effectively pushed back Indigenous rights at the federal level (exemplified in Australia's initial response to the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples on its referral to the United Nations General Assembly in 2007), and broader acceptance of their position as fundamentally significant in the cultural and social life of the nation. Other events, such as the nationally celebrated Sorry Day which has occurred every year since 1998, and the Walk for Reconciliation which resulted in almost half a million people participating in a march across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in that city alone, do however express something of the emotion attached to Indigenous experience nationally.

Laudable as that is mainstream participation in such events does not necessarily indicate great familiarity, experience with or understanding of the complexity and diversity of Indigenous culture and society. Instead, most non-Indigenous citizens of Australia draw on other than first-hand experience with Indigenous people and cultures, and considerable misunderstanding continues to prevail. Davis (2007) suggests one of the reasons for this as being the long-standing perception of Indigenous heritage as a remnant of a bygone era, interpreted as associated with the "primitiveness" of an "extinct or near-extinct people". He (Davis 2007, p. xx) suggests that in the consciousness of many non-Indigenous Australians, Indigenous people have been "absent as intentional actors ... engaging with their own heritage". They have thus been marginalised by a popular discourse that presents Indigenous heritage as a curiosity and a relic rather than the living force of a dynamic culture.

As a result, one of the most readily accessible sources of information about Indigenous culture is public museums. Most of these in Australia are administered at the State rather than the Federal level, and tend to present Indigenous culture to the Australian public through a concentration on either regional cultures, major ethnographic holdings or both. The sustainability of this cultural heritage is ethically to be regarded as the right and responsibility of Indigenous people, but is also implicated in the investiture of Indigenous culture as part of the national estate, frequently located within and managed by such public museums. As part of that estate, its sustainability includes more than concerns about sympathetic exhibition of Indigenous material culture in their collections, and is now more likely to include ways of positively reinforcing the linkages between museums, curators and the source or descendant communities relevant to the materials they contain. For example, curators in what was previously Museum Victoria's Indigenous Cultures Section and external researchers have worked jointly for at least twenty years with Indigenous people in various locations in Australia, on projects focusing on ethnographic materials collected by Donald Thomson in the late 1920-30s.

Thomson worked in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory as well as Cape York Peninsula, and the Lamalama material constitutes only one part of the Cape York Peninsula materials he collected. In the Lamalama project discussed here, those manifestations of heritage noted by the CSICH have all been important, particularly the elements of oral tradition and cultural practice expressed through both tangible and intangible elements of culture. Important though the role of outsiders has been, from Thomson through to contemporary researchers, the fields of practice broadly captured by the CSICH's concept of intangible heritage as "knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe" (UNESCO, 2003) are expressed by and embodied in Lamalama perceptions of the landscape and where they fit within it. This approach to heritage indicates that it exists within individuals, where it is expressed through personal memory, collective remembering (Wertsch, 2002), and knowledge of history and traditional practice, as well as embedded in objects. Such intangible expressions of heritage might therefore be perceived as ephemeral, and undoubtedly are in some senses. However, rather than challenging more static notions of heritage as the substantive evidence of the past, viewing it as dynamic and part of human engagement with the environment, broadly understood, allows us to focus more on ways in which any relics may be used to create the continuing associations between people and their past that we understand as having the status of heritage. As Turkle (2007, p.6-8) notes, objects have power and life roles that are "multiple and fluid", and these sometimes include moments of transition. Turkle's interest is in the evocative power of objects, as is this paper's. It is concerned with the ways in which meanings shift according to their temporal and spatial circumstances, and to clarify this requires some exploration of key events in the life of the Lamalama community.

## Overview of the Lamalama and their history

The Lamalama are the southernmost of the people described by Thomson (1933; 1934; Rigsby and Chase, 1998, p. 192) as the "Sandbeach People", indicating their close connection with the marine environment of the eastern side of Cape York Peninsula, in the northern Australian state of Queensland. In common with many other Indigenous people in Australia, the Lamalama have been subject to dispossession and removal by the state. In 1961, a group of around 20-30 people were forcibly removed from their country at Port Stewart (see Figure 1) and transported to Cowal Creek (now Bamaga), a mission some hundreds of kilometres to the north. This group represented a core set of families still resident on their land at a time when most Indigenous people in Queensland had already been removed to missions and reserves or were otherwise subject to state control. The Lamalama are today a small group of perhaps 200 people, mostly residing in and around the town of Coen, a small service centre in the middle of the Peninsula. Like other remote-dwelling Indigenous people the Lamalama live close to their "country" or traditional land, which includes offshore waters and islands and is located in the hinterland of Princess Charlotte Bay approximately 100 kilometres to the east of Coen.

Lamalalama lands are thus centred around the estuary of the Stewart River (Fig. 1). This area, known in Lamalama clan languages as Yintjingga (Rigsby and Hafner, 2011; Rigsby 1992, p.354; Hafner 1999, p.112-114), is the location of a few small settlements maintained by the Lamalama, which they visit as their circumstances permit - few Lamalama people own the four-wheel drive vehicles required to traverse the distance over unsealed roads. There is nonetheless a small group of people who are permanent or semi-permanent residents there. They are able to support their incomes from welfare payments through subsistence activities, particularly fishing. Since 1991 the Lamalama have engaged in state-sanctioned processes that resulted in formal acquisition of title to now considerable parts of their traditional estate. Such processes have however resulted in some fragmentation of their interests, and the division of their country into separate land parcels and forms of title.

However, the implementation of a Ranger program is a recent development that allows people to live and work on their country, and attend to some of its heritage values. This project is federally funded and employs around half a dozen Lamalama people as Rangers, with responsibility for assessing and documenting the natural and cultural heritage values of their country (Commonwealth of Australia). This program has coincided with the deaths of some significant senior community members or elders over the period from 2008-2012. These elders actively promoted Lamalama engagement with the Thomson materials in Museum Victoria. One man in particular, Sunlight Bassani who died in 2008, hoped that coming into direct contact with objects made, used or depicting their ancestors going about their daily

activities would instil a renewed sense of pride in the Lamalama. The specific context for Sunlight Bassani's and other elders<sup>iv</sup> concern was a continuing misuse of alcohol and instances of violence within their community, resulting in court orders and imprisonment. Along with poor levels of education, health status and unemployment, these remain part of the daily experience of the Lamalama. Although Sunlight Bassani did not live to see the outcomes of the project, the younger Lamalama people now thrust into leadership roles have used the Ranger program and their interest in the Thomson materials to continue his struggle to create a better future.

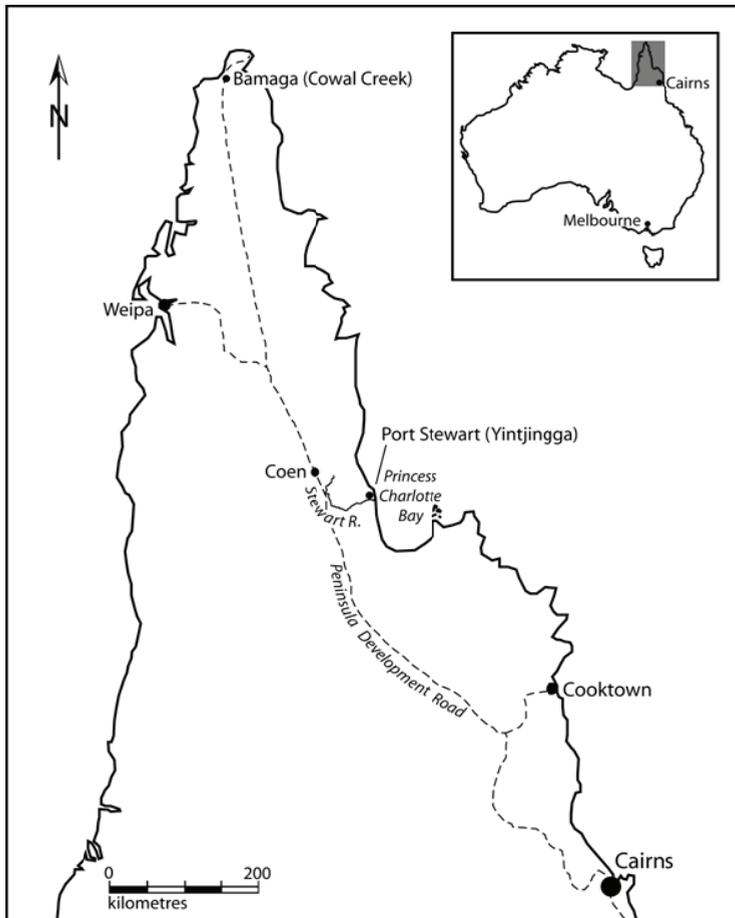


Figure 1. Map of Cape York Peninsula, Australia indicating key locations mentioned in text (c. K. Quirk).

### The research project: Lamalama cultural expressions and the Thomson Collection

As well as having its own separate intellectual goals, the project can thus be seen as an expression of Lamalama cultural identity with heritage outcomes. Donald F. Thomson was a scholar of natural science as well as anthropology, and the Thomson Collection contains ethnographic and botanical materials, as well as field notes, papers and numerous photographic images taken by him. Between 1928, as a Diploma of Anthropology student at Sydney University and on subsequent trips until 1933, he visited Port Stewart and other regions of Cape York Peninsula, where he collected specimens of plant life and material culture, and took black-and-white images of people engaged in their daily activities using glass-plate cameras (Allen, 2008; Rigsby and Peterson, 2005). Thomson's widow, Mrs Dorita Thomson, gifted the collection to the University of Melbourne after his death, and it was subsequently placed on loan to Museum Victoria. It can be surmised that it was not Thomson's primary concern that the materials enter the national heritage estate, but their location within the public space of the museum potentially increases their importance by allowing for broader public engagement with them through exhibitions and research, and for deeper and more specific interactions by source communities of relevance such as the Lamalama. Our research sought to test the latter assumption through the methodological design of the project.<sup>v</sup>

The research thus had a number of goals regarding the Thomson artefacts and their potential to revitalise cultural practice. Central to this was Sunlight Bassani's belief that exposure to images and artefacts would provide a window onto the life of their forebears and lead to positive social change, and our varied interests as researchers in facilitating and recording these processes. The project was conducted between 2006 and 2010, and brought small groups of Lamalama people down to Melbourne to visit MV, view the Collection, and advise curators on its management. Groups ranged in size from three to eleven people. We also made visits to the Lamalama at home in Cape York Peninsula, taking artefacts from the Museum when we visited there in July-August 2008. Bush twine, hunting implements, bags, grass skirts, the raw materials for making these implements and items, bush toys and fishing nets were included in the array of artefacts. Some of these objects were returning 'home' for the first time in almost 80 years, having been collected by Thomson in 1929, and decisions about which artefacts to include were a crucial part of the research design. Objects that would be most meaningful to current Lamalama people were an important consideration. However, the inherent difficulties in transporting artefacts over such large distances (more than 3500 kilometres by air and land) and varied conditions including exposure to dust and potentially humid conditions dictated the selection of objects to some extent.

Our priorities as researchers were differentially shared with the Lamalama. Our shared goals centred on re-connecting them with their heritage in the Donald Thomson Collection. We were also interested in collaborative approaches to curation and management of this heritage, and the degree to which contact with some of the less familiar parts of the Collection would be likely to impact on contemporary identity and behaviour. We were therefore interested in observing and understanding the operations of memory, and the reciprocal processes and outcomes involved in facilitating Lamalama interactions with the materials. This process began well before we were able to acquire the necessary funding to conduct this research. Small groups of the Lamalama had previously visited the Collection, accompanied by the linguist and anthropologist Bruce Rigsby (Hafner, 2010) to work with senior curator Lindy Allen on aspects of its curation and management. These visits allowed them to familiarise themselves with objects made or used by their forebears, in some cases their own parents, and to view Thomson's images of these same people engaged in a variety of secular and ritual activities while living in the bush, largely free of the influence of pastoralists and other non-Indigenous neighbours. Thomson's images depict traditional ceremonies, ritual preparations as well as hunting and gathering activities, and everyday life in camp. Cultural activities such as traditional burial ceremonies and rain-making rituals were suppressed or ceased as the Lamalama became more and more subject to White control, and are not practised today. Over time exposure to this evidence of past practice through visits to the museum prompted an enduring interest in the materials, demonstrated in regular requests to MV for copies of the images. These interactions between the Lamalama and the Thomson materials ultimately led also to requests that we find sources of funding that would allow them to visit the Collection more frequently, leading directly to our collaboration with them on this project<sup>vi</sup>.

### Lamalama interactions with their heritage in the Thomson Collection

The part of the project of specific interest to the discussion involved separate events during fieldwork conducted in 2008. To provide context to this in the following sections, I first discuss Lamalama reactions to the museum artefacts in a variety of locations, then compare these with their responses to a location of specific cultural significance within the landscape. I then discuss differences in Lamalama responses to both objects and the landscape as compared to images, and argue that the particular material qualities of some objects permit of more interpretative possibilities, which therefore sheds some light on the more spontaneous emotional attachment demonstrated in relation to them. Across the stages of the project, we found Lamalama responses to the materials both within the museum and when removed to Cape York Peninsula to be both expected and unexpected. Previous experience of bringing Lamalama people to MV led us to expect high levels of interest and engagement with the artefacts.

When visiting the Collection in Melbourne, Lamalama people had willingly engaged in an exchange of information with curators. They viewed the objects on the storeroom shelves, handled them and discussed their qualities with curators, and viewed an installation of Indigenous materials, Bunjilaka<sup>vii</sup> that included a backlit wall containing Thomson's images of their forebears engaged in the activities described above. As people who live in a remote part of the country, they do not commonly enter what is in fact the privileged space traditionally encapsulated by the museum. In this space, or contact zone (Clifford 1997), objects once culturally ordinary and everyday are invested with meanings that are foreign to the people who produced them, and potentially impact on their sustainability as objects of specific cultural heritage, becoming instead objects of the national or even international<sup>viii</sup> heritage estate. The interests of the Lamalama, by contrast, are primarily to do with recollection and retrieval of their very specific past, and this was differentially reflected through the stages of the project. Museums, on the other hand, have been concerned with iconographic expressions of humanity, and by virtue of their mandate to seek and display a common history, have long been positioned as institutions of public education. The authority vested in museums is based on certain assumptions, and ethnologically these included that collecting the material culture of colonised peoples would ensure its preservation as the people themselves succumbed to pressure from more dominant culture (Peers and Brown 2003, p.1).

This institutional authority has been challenged in the changing world of museum practice by the more recent approaches to museology and curation that incorporate the perspectives of such

communities. Peers and Brown (2003, p.1) assert there has been a shift in museum practice to "a much more two-way process" of working with source communities to incorporate their knowledge and perspectives on the ethnographic materials contained within their collections, and much more collaborative engagements. As Phillips has argued (2003, p.161), "the museum is being renewed as a site for the production of new knowledge", which places collaborative relationships and the development of new meaning at the forefront of its endeavours. Museums are now more likely to see their mission as concerned with engagement, and the agendas of both museums and the communities they service and support have over time moved closer to each other. Here in Australia, the active engagement of Indigenous peoples with museums has been a vital part of this process of decolonisation of museum spaces and practices. Yet as Herle (2003) also argues, the presence of objects in museums does not necessarily alienate them from their original cultural contexts; it may instead provide the agency required to facilitate contemporary community members' interests in coming to grips with their past. In view of this, the degree of social distance between source community members and museum objects of relevance to them becomes important to consider.

On their visits to MV, the Lamalama took the opportunity to view its exhibitions as well as to work with curators in its storerooms. They have expressed pride in the fact their culture is on display and being viewed by international and other visitors (Hafner, Rigsby and Allen 2007), and have been willing participants in the time-consuming and emotionally demanding process of travelling the several thousand kilometres from their home in remote Coen, to Museum Victoria in the urban environment of Melbourne. This deep engagement with the artefacts on visits to the museum therefore seemed to indicate a similar level of interest and engagement would be demonstrated when we extended the contact zone of the museum and returned objects to Cape York Peninsula in 2008, at the mid-point in the project. To some degree this was the case, but not entirely so. Once in Coen, we first arranged for viewing of the objects within the township in response to requests from some individuals. There is limited public space available in the town, and the state-run health clinic generously loaned us their meeting room for a few hours. Lamalama people visited in small groups throughout the morning, and given our previous experience of their engagement with the objects in the museum and through their viewing of Thomson's photographic images, we thought it likely the material presence of the objects would evoke a similar response when outside the formal walls of the museum. This, however, was not quite the case.

Although a number of people came and looked at them, their response to the objects seemed less enthusiastic than we had expected. We speculated this might reflect the site, which while not hostile, was not exclusively a Lamalama or even an Aboriginal one, in which they perhaps did not feel secure enough to engage in Lamalama "business" too freely. Yet this was also the case at Yintjingga, where a mixed group of adults interacted with the objects. While most people were clearly interested in them, their responses could be characterised as interested and mildly curious rather than a significant emotional engagement.

In consultation with Lamalama representatives, we organised a trip to Ngawal, a Story Place (that is, a sacred site) and historically important location a little south of Yintjingga, in order to allow the Lamalama to further interact with the artefacts on country. This trip proved to be of considerable interest, but again not necessarily in ways we had expected, and the reasons for this are speculated on in the following section. In discussing the differing attachments encapsulated in Lamalama responses to the museum-based artefacts versus elements of the humanised landscape I seek to demonstrate that conceptualisations of heritage should include affect and cognition. Intangible heritage in particular can be expressed through what is felt and known, but not necessarily able to be touched or held: the sometimes intensely felt and intangible associations of personal experience that inform human interactions with the material world.

### **The trip to Ngawal: objects and meanings**

Around 20 adults and children accompanied us on the drive to Ngawal. We camped overnight, then drove back to Coen the next day, stopping on the beach for lunch near the Shark Story place, and visiting nearby Wayaamaw, the slightly inland location of another Story Place. Wayaamaw is located on land that forms part of a pastoral lease, and has been dammed to provide water for cattle; physically, the site is a cleared area containing a fairly large lagoon covered in waterlilies. This was the first visit to this site by some members of the party despite its cultural significance and proximity to Yintjingga (little more than an hour's drive along bush roads). Wayaamaw is also historically important as a place where members of one of the most important Lamalama families of this area, the Liddy family, regularly camped before their removal to Cowal Creek in 1961. A senior member of this family, one of the now recently deceased elders, took the opportunity to introduce this place to family members who had not been there before. This was a highly emotional moment, with some of them quickly breaking into tears.

Story Places are not necessarily visually or topographically spectacular, and while very attractive, the cultural importance of Wayaamaw does not reside in its evident aesthetic qualities. That is to say, the aesthetic qualities of such sites in Indigenous perceptions differ to those that might be ascribed by non-Indigenous people, and are connected to the cultural, social and historical values that are invested in them by their traditional owners. For example, Lamalama people express their aesthetic appreciation of the landscape in terms of its environmental qualities or value as a resource, commenting on the loveliness of the water in a rapidly-flowing creek, the beauty of the shade provided by trees on a hot summer day, or

its intrinsic value as a sacred location. While Wayaamaw is important as a Story Place, on this occasion their response to it incorporated both aesthetic and emotional elements that contrasted with their earlier interactions with the objects from the Thomson collection.

At the Shark Story Place, we had found although people were prepared to look at and pick up individual objects laid out on tarpaulins on the ground, to reminisce about having seen them being used by their parents and so on, they did not engage with them as they had with Wayaamaw, a physical manifestation of their culture and history, and a place the Lamalama had all heard about but not all had previously visited. While familiar with the Shark Story Place, having visited it relatively often before, Wayaamaw was not part of their previous physical experience of the landscape. Their reactions to it can be contrasted with their reactions to the Thomson photographic images and the collection as whole, which consists of different kinds of materials through which they can interpret their heritage.

### **Other journeys: the images and transitions in meaning**

As already noted Museum Victoria curators receive regular requests for copies of Thomson images from community members. I had previously concluded (Hafner, 2010) that people felt a lesser attachment to the objects, but on reflection I have come to believe that for some of the Lamalama there is a kind of nostalgia that attaches to the objects when they are out of their museum context, while for others they take on an identity of almost sacred importance. Both responses indicate the social distance the artefacts have acquired in their journey from mundane objects of everyday usage to their ethnological purposes as anthropological specimens and museum artefacts, before their return to their place of origin as "museum objects" and vestiges of the Lamalama past. After so long in the museum, there is a sense in which the objects have effectively become "institutionalised", and while still perceived as culturally relevant, the investments of meaning made in them seem to change according to their spatial location. While recognised by the Lamalama as having primary connection with their history, the objects do not have the same intimate and immediate emotional weight as they would if they were in fact keepsakes given by a parent or grandparent. While nonetheless recognised by the Lamalama as important remnants of their heritage, their long sequestering as part of a distant museum collection has removed their mundane purposes, which renders them as exotic in Lamalama perceptions.

This should not be taken to indicate the objects are now devoid of emotional connections. Yet by contrast, Thomson's photographic images were perceived differently, and I see this as related to the differing material qualities of the images in comparison to the objects, and the interpretive possibilities they therefore allow. While the objects are clearly viewed by the Lamalama as evidence from their past, the images allow them to revisit their ancestors and familiarise themselves with the practices that produced these objects. The people they see in the images are for the most part individuals whose names they have heard, but who they have mostly not known through personal experience. Through the images they are able acquaint themselves with these Old People (a term used to describe deceased relatives, and ancestors generally, remembered or not) and to examine the culture of their past.<sup>ix</sup>

The images therefore provide a ready means for personal engagement with their heritage. Individuals have acquired their own collections of Thomson images, and will openly discuss the people, activities and locations they depict with each other. We found younger people would ask their older relatives about the kin relationships between the people depicted, and how they were related to themselves, or comment on evident changes in the landscape in the time since the images were taken by Thomson. I have elsewhere suggested (Hafner, 2010) that the value of the images as part of the heritage of the Lamalama resides in the fact they contain multiple cues in terms of information about people, practices, objects and locations within the Lamalama landscape, and so make it easier for the Lamalama to develop a narrative about their past than is achieved by interactions with the objects alone. Edwards (2003, p.84) has pointed out that photographic images allow the past to be transported seemingly in entirety to the present, but that the meanings contained within such images shift across time and space, becoming re-classified with each shift. New meanings are read into them, and they therefore become identity documents, which their particular materiality allows in the way that contact with the objects, their solidity and meanings do not. Edwards and Hart (2004) point out that photographs are also three-dimensional objects, not simply two-dimensional traces of the past on paper, and this allows for a more complete engagement with them – they can be handled, collected, and importantly, owned, and through this process the past can be interpreted and even completely retrieved.

This point was also demonstrated by Lamalama interactions with the objects. While they did engage with the artefacts in interpretive ways when they were on country, for example discussing the manner in which a stone axe head would have been fitted to a wooden shaft, or the type of fibre used for the making of fishing nets, the possibilities for their interpretation were limited by their material reality. In terms of our research goals, we had wondered whether taking objects to Lamalama country rather than bringing the Lamalama to the Museum storerooms would result in information that was new to us emerging through the process. We did record some additional information, but by contrast, the images contain multiple levels of meaning that seemed to be more easily read by their viewers. While it is interesting, for example, to know that one's grandfather made a particular tool, there is less room for imaginative wondering than seeing an image of him engaged in the task. The image allows for questions: "Where was he? Why was he making this implement? Was he about to go hunting?" or even, "Did he have children at the time he was doing this?" Images thus allow contemporary people to enter into the past and

make sense of it in ways that contribute dynamically to constructions of identity. In this sense, the Thomson images form an important part of the cultural heritage of the Lamalama. This poses questions about the differences between its tangible and intangible dimensions.

### **Intangible heritage: the meanings in objects**

Lamalama responses to artefacts, images and landscape differed, but both on country and within the institutional walls of the museum, they demonstrated emotional attachments to objects of their heritage. Story Places such as Wayaamaw are of central cultural importance, while objects residing in the museum have the power to strengthen their connections to such places through the possibilities they offer for interpreting a past otherwise lost to memory. For present generations, Thomson's images represent something valuable about themselves that is not otherwise available, and it seems it is the interpretive possibilities offered by the Thomson image that particularly resonates with them. Graham and Howard (2008, p.5) have suggested that heritage "can be envisaged as a knowledge, simultaneously a cultural product and a political resource", thus set in particular circumstances and always subject to negotiation:

If heritage knowledges are situated in particular social and intellectual circumstances, they are time-specific and thus their meanings can be altered as texts and re-read in changing times, circumstances and constructs of place and scale (Graham and Howard 2008, p.5).

In these senses, the meanings and knowledge invested in the Thomson images and the objects he collected from people in the early twentieth century constitute intangible elements of Lamalama heritage, linked to places and people as well as to objects, through memories and understandings that develop over generations, and form the continuities understood as culture and tradition. In this sense the symbolic value of the Thomson materials resides in the dynamism they impart to contemporary Lamalama people as they work through the loss of loved and respected leaders in a continuing situation of poverty and social and economic marginalisation. Both the images and objects in the Thomson Collection need to be considered in terms of their materiality as well as their intangible qualities for the Lamalama, however.

Whilst it has seemed there is a qualitative difference in their responses to the images versus the artefacts, as photographs or copies of photographs the former are themselves material objects, able to be viewed, collected, handled and interpreted (Edwards, 2004). In this way they have a social life (Appadurai, 1986), although their trajectory towards an interpretive destination as determined by the Lamalama has been different to that of the objects. Whereas the objects seem to have been subject to greater alienation from collective emotional response through their continuing repose within the museum, the images seem to be perceived as the sites of contemporary emotional connection and identification, and provoke a similar level of engagement as certain places within the landscape, such as Wayaamaw. They constitute a visually perceptible historical record, and are therefore open to personal interpretation and attachment; because they are tactile objects they are not bound to the museum and are able to be owned, shared, stored and interpreted according to differing circumstances of time, place and interest. Similarly, places within the landscape are locations of personal narrative and interpretation that contribute to the collective associations constituting the heritage associations of a people. Wayaamaw, for example, provoked intense emotions among those who had not visited it before, while for those already familiar with the place, it was of more passing interest – their reactions were more mundane, concerned with the evident changes in the landscape as a result of its conversion to a dam for cattle.

It is important therefore to acknowledge that intangible aspects of their heritage constitute a significant part of their contemporary identity as a people and significantly inform their daily practice. Their heritage is invested in objects produced by their ancestors, but also in the knowledge and memories of contemporary individuals. It exists in the information these now ageing people can impart to younger relatives about the lives and activities of their Old People depicted in the Thomson images, and which circulates in their conversation, memories and recollections. It has also been evident in the loss of knowledge associated with the recent deaths of elders such as Sunlight Bassani, who represent, to a large extent, the last generation who remember or participated in the cultural world portrayed in the Thomson images. These events highlight questions about cultural practice and the sustainability of the heritage associated with them. Given the generational transitions taking place mean that people just entering early middle age are already being placed in leadership roles as a result of deaths among their elders, it is worth considering the potential impacts of a project such as ours, which has brought younger people into closer contact with objects of their heritage over recent years than had previously been the case.

### **Conclusion**

It is tempting to assert the significance of the link between the reconnection to heritage occasioned by this project and the impetus to return to country through the Ranger program for this middle generation of Lamalama individuals. Yet there have been a number of other equally significant processes involved. These include the acquisition of formal title to their homelands and other events not discussed here, such as their engagement with innovative programs in justice and changes to local educational practices. This middle generation of the Lamalama are now in the process of becoming the elders themselves, and this fact is not lost on them. They are also acutely aware they have lost significant resources of knowledge and experience as a consequence of the recent deaths in their community, and their actions represent a moral

response to this situation. A central organising principle in Lamalama social relations is the concept of respect, demonstrated in behaviour towards one's various categories of kin, the use of appropriate terms to designate kinship and observation of the rules for behaviour on country. Beyond this, some of the recently-deceased elders are highly respected and honoured for their dedication to the struggle to win back the land, as well as for their leadership and personal qualities. The emerging category of people who will take over Lamalama leadership view individuals such as Sunlight Bassani as embodying the qualities of a "proper Lamalama" person, and have been inspired by his memory to carry on his fight. His loss, and that of other elders, has been a catalyst for current actions.

The Lamalama have now re-acquired as much land as they are ever likely to receive through statutory processes, and this means carrying out the work of further re-establishing themselves on their country through community development projects. Part of their training as Rangers involves cultural activities, and their experience with the Thomson materials has already prompted some initial ideas about ways to showcase their culture in the Ranger headquarters at Yintjingga. For the Lamalama, therefore, the Thomson materials do not simply provide an historical record – what they see in the images is also guidance about culturally appropriate ways to interact with their country. As a sentient landscape it is peopled by the same Old People who are shown in the Thomson images. While these social actors might no longer behave as they did in life, they remind the current generations of their responsibilities towards the land and each other. It is these intangible elements of interpretive possibility offered by the Thomson materials that have been so important in contributing to current re-assertions of Lamalama cultural identity.

The sustainability and value of heritage can be seen as residing at least in part in how it links the past and present identities of a people. Initiatives such as the Ranger program assist the Lamalama to foster a continuing relationship with their heritage. They, like their forebears, must now find ways to work with and maintain both its tangible and intangible elements. Their current experience includes significant intergenerational change and few opportunities to document the history and memory that tie intangible heritage to places and objects. The long-term sustainability of Lamalama heritage will therefore depend not only on the existence of significant cultural material (objects, and also history, memories, customs and knowledge and understanding of how these are invested in objects), but also on the choices the Lamalama continue to make about the ways they will participate in, and sustain, their own cultural traditions.

Any concept of effective cultural management would thus accommodate and value the intangible expressions of such cultural heritage. These expressions are constituted of varied negotiations, interactions and investments, including the emotional investments that have the power to address the absent places of memory. It is therefore perhaps important to remember something of the history of museums. Museums in Australia were developed within the British tradition, and as Conaty (2003, p.228) has described, this involved making them accessible to a broader public than the gentry, in a nineteenth-century process of democratisation intended to create a "general improvement in the nature of the working class". Given the opportunity to ponder the wonders of Western civilisation held in British museums, it was thought that workers would "eschew the local tavern" and "character reformation" would result. One hundred and fifty years later, Sunlight Bassani expressed a similar aspiration, when he worked to bring his people into a closer relationship with the museum. He also hoped that closer contact would result in eschewing of the tavern, and a deepened sense of cultural identity as a result of recovering evidence it contains of some of the absent places of Lamalama memory. It is somewhat ironic, but heartening, that peoples who were formerly the object of the museum project are now able to stake their claims on its resources to reformulate negative public perceptions of their culture (Davis, 2007). Through projects such as the one described in this paper, they have at the same time been able to retain its functionalities as the repository of their heritage, in the process contributing to its reshaping to their own purposes.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Indigenous populations in Australia include both Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the many mainland groups referred to as Aboriginal peoples.

<sup>ii</sup> While the ABS notes: "The estimates of the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) and non-Indigenous populations presented in this product are experimental. The inherent uncertainty in Indigenous census counts as well as the method of estimating net census undercount of the Indigenous population means the estimates should be interpreted with caution", it seems nonetheless historically consistent with previous estimates about the size of Australia's Indigenous population.

<sup>iii</sup> The Parliamentary Statement on Racial Tolerance affirmed Australia's commitment to racial respect and received bipartisan support in Australia's federal government. It was adopted in October 1996.

<sup>iv</sup> This included Sunlight's wife, who died less than a year ago at the time of writing. Out of respect for Lamalama tradition, I do not mention the names of other more recently deceased elders such as her.

<sup>v</sup> The project drew on theorising about the ecomuseum and museological approaches that expand the museum beyond the institutional space of its buildings. Museum Victoria has a history of engaging in similar curatorial and research activities with other Indigenous peoples. Museum Victoria curatorial staff, led by Senior Curator Lindy Allen, were members of the five-member research team.

- <sup>vi</sup> This project, LP 0667418 Oral Tradition, Memory and Social Change: Indigenous Participation in the Curation and Use of Museum Collections was funded by the Australian Research Council, under its nationally competitive Linkage Projects grants scheme.
- <sup>vii</sup> At the time, the Aboriginal Centre at Melbourne Museum, a campus of Museum Victoria.
- <sup>viii</sup> In 2008, the Donald Thomson Collection was inscribed on the Australian listing of the UNESCO Memory of the World Register as the Donald Thomson Ethnohistory Collection.
- <sup>ix</sup> Like many other Australian Indigenous groups, the Lamalama do not mention the name of deceased individuals after their death, usually for a full seasonal cycle or longer. This proscription also applies to the viewing of images of deceased persons but in the case of the Thomson images, it does not seem to apply, perhaps because the images depict people unknown personally to contemporary Lamalama people. The Old People depicted in the images are individuals who in Lamalama belief have through death acquired levels of supernatural power and authority beyond that of their mortal relatives.

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