



# The Ethnographic Echo

ARCHAEOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO WRITING LONG-TERM HISTORIES  
OF INDIGENOUS SPIRITUAL BELIEFS AND RITUAL PRACTICES

» IAN J. McNIVEN

*T*his paper explores the potential for Australian archaeology to comprehend the hidden complexities and constructed historical dimensions of the archaeological record of Indigenous Australians.<sup>1</sup> These constructed historical dimensions go to the core issue of how we not only write, but more fundamentally conceive of, the archaeological history of Indigenous Australians over the past 50,000 years. This concern leads me to ask the following question — Are there properties of archaeological sites that provide clues as to how Indigenous Australians in the ancient past both conceived of, and constructed notions of, historical and trans-generational time? I believe these properties do exist but in ways that require us to reconceptualise the archaeological record, move out of our comfort zone and enter worlds of object materiality, agency, and temporality very different to what we are familiar with in the West. Armed with the right theoretical frameworks, I also believe that archaeologists have the capacity to glimpse these properties and so bring us a little closer to understanding how unfamiliar peoples of the unfamiliar past lived their lives and historically constructed their world.<sup>2</sup> In essence, my approach calls for archaeologists to re-envisage many archaeological sites as deliberately historicised places and the intentionalised result of cumulative depositional practices that explicitly referenced past practices to

structure future practices.<sup>3</sup> I will spend the rest of this paper attempting to justify these beliefs by focusing on the *ritualisation of life* in relation to one particular type of everyday occupation site type dominated by shellfish food remains and known by archaeologists as shell middens.<sup>4</sup> While in most cases, Australian Indigenous shell middens appear as layers of shell eroding from coastal sediments, across many parts of northern tropical Australia shell midden mounds are found which can be over 10 metres in height and contain thousands of tonnes of shells (fig. 1). Peter Hiscock notes that incremental accumulation of these mounds was regulated by seemingly enigmatic ‘cultural rules’ of shell discard.<sup>5</sup> My paper will more broadly conceptualise the ritualised and embedded historicity of these cultural rules in the context of midden mounds of Torres Strait in far northeast Australia and what I call ‘ritualised middening practices’.

## EDUCATION OF AN ARCHAEOLOGIST

My recognition and understanding of the long-term histories of ‘ritualised middening practices’ occurred after I was introduced to the ceremonial and ritual maritime world of Torres Strait Islanders in 1996. This came six years after my PhD which focused on the Aboriginal archaeology of the Fraser Island region of coastal southeast Queensland.<sup>6</sup>

(above)  
Detail of Fig. 9,  
p. 14



Following a 1980s undergraduate immersion in processualism and the scientific turn of what became known in the USA as the New Archaeology in the 1960s and '70s, my PhD research focused on shell middens and what they could tell me about the antiquity of regional subsistence practices and settlement patterns. My approach was in tune with what other coastal archaeologists were doing around Australia in the 1980s and what most Australian coastal archaeologists continue to focus on today.<sup>7</sup> But overseas, and particularly in the United Kingdom, the late '80s and early '90s saw a new post-processualist approach to archaeology spearheaded by people such as Ian Hodder, Michael Shanks, and Chris Tilley.<sup>8</sup> Post-processualists re-conceptualised the place of objects and material culture from one of simply reflecting society to one of actively expressing, constituting, and generating society. No longer seen as passive, material culture and many archaeological sites were now seen as having been structured by agency, so that they were empowered, either intentionally or unintentionally, to act back to structure cultural practices. In this guise, the archaeological record is not so much a record, fossil repository, or representation of the consequences of past

behaviours, but an active component and material dimension of behaviours with agency for ongoing engagement. A consequence of this re-conceptualisation was that ceremonial and ritual practices, relegated by processual archaeologists as epiphenomena and peripheral to the development of cultural laws of environmental adaptation, were now seen as being as important as the so-called core issues of subsistence and settlement. Although I was initially unconvinced by these early post-processual proclamations, my interest in anthropology and increasing interactions with Aboriginal people made me wonder if I was missing something in my approach to coastal archaeology.

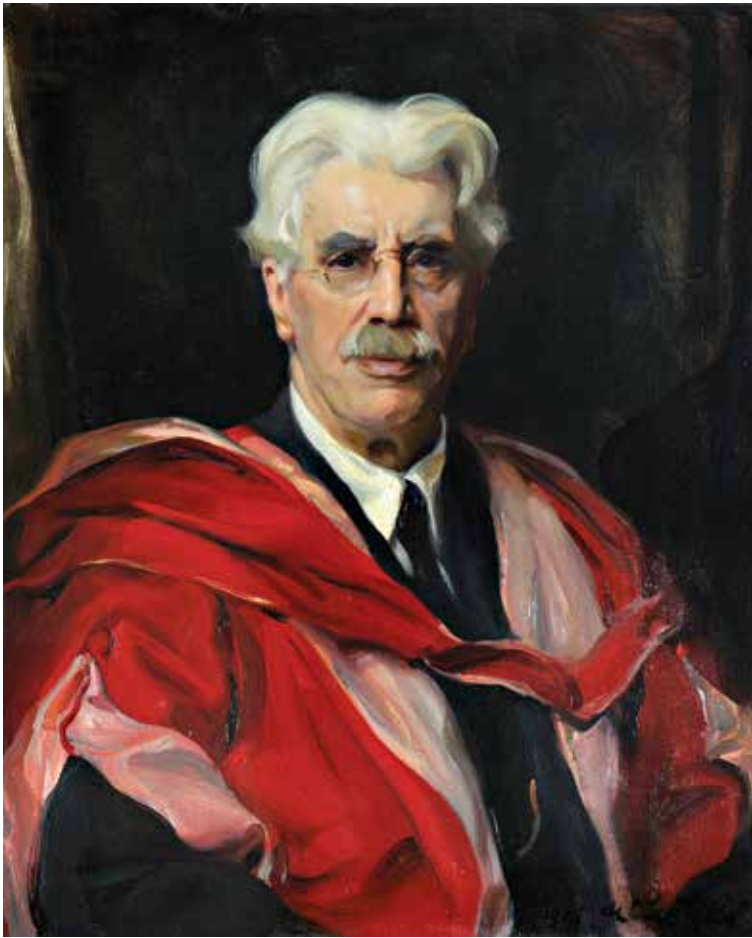
My approach to coastal archaeology and marine specialisation went through a paradigmatic shift after visiting Torres Strait at the invitation of two anthropologists — Judith Fitzpatrick, who specialised in Torres Strait Islander culture, and John Cordell, an expert on customary marine tenure and editor of the 1986 seminal text *A Sea of Small Boats*. Judith and John wanted me to work with them on a project, sponsored by the region's Island Coordinating Council, to document management issues associated with cultural heritage sites across the islands of Torres

(below)

Fig. 1. Aboriginal shell mound at Imbuorr, Weipa area of far north Queensland, dating to the past 3000 years.

COURTESY MICHAEL MORRISON





(above)

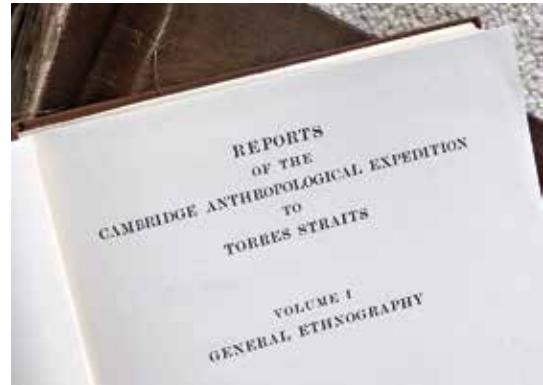
Fig. 2. Alfred C. Haddon, Reader in Ethnology, Cambridge University, aged 70. Painting by Philip Alexius de László, 1925.

BY KIND PERMISSION OF THE MASTER AND FELLOWS OF CHRIST'S COLLEGE CAMBRIDGE

(above right)

Fig. 3. The author's well-used copy of the *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits*, published 1901–35.

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Strait.<sup>9</sup> At the time, my knowledge of Torres Strait Islander culture and sites was pretty basic. Yet even in the early stages of my research into the region I was confronted with the fact that what I had come to understand as classic archaeological expressions of ancient coastal peoples — namely shell middens — was rather limited in terms of defining the specialised maritime culture of Torres Strait Islanders. Three domains of information were critical in this regard. First, Torres Strait Islanders have largely escaped the onslaught of colonialism and dispossession seen across much of Aboriginal Australia.<sup>10</sup> As such, they have continued to live on their ancestral islands and maintain their specialised maritime culture and identity, a process of cultural continuity recognised legally with successful native title claims across their islands and traditional sea territories. Here, a specialised maritime culture is not limited to archaeological inference but remains a living entity. On any day in Torres Strait you can see myriad expressions of maritime culture and identity, ranging from

hunting of dugongs and turtles, fishing, and collection of shellfish, to singing, dancing, and representation of marine totems in linocut prints and on tombstones and sports clothing.<sup>11</sup>

Second, there are the six volumes and 2300 pages of the *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits* assembled by Alfred Haddon and his team between 1901 and 1935 following fieldwork in 1888 and 1898 (figs 2–3).<sup>12</sup> These volumes represent the most detailed corpus of ethnographic information on a group of Indigenous Australians from the nineteenth century. Here the rich cultural lives of Torres Strait Islanders are laid out in graphic detail. I was particularly taken by the complex ceremonial and ritual dimensions of Torres Strait Islander culture documented by Haddon and his team, and people's spiritual relationship with the sea. I was intrigued to learn that many of these ceremonial and ritual dimensions involved physically-constructed sites such as shrines of shells and bones that would preserve archaeologically. Clearly, the specialised maritime culture of Torres Strait Islanders was not focused on shell middens as were the maritime cultures researched for my PhD. Indeed, I was somewhat dismayed by Haddon's dismissive comment on Torres Strait midden sites: 'Unfortunately, I was unable to discover anything concerning the archaeology of the Torres Straits Islands. I did not see any shell mounds, although I looked for such. I consider it improbable that much will ever be found to illustrate the former condition of the people.'<sup>13</sup>

The third domain of information that influenced my thinking related to previous archaeological research in Torres Strait. I learned that I was not the first archaeologist



in Torres Strait to be confronted by what in essence was the paradigmatic challenge of reconciling the then focus of Australian coastal archaeology on subsistence practices and midden sites with the vast array of ceremonial and ritual sites associated with marine subsistence specialisation presented by Haddon's ethnographic accounts. My predecessor was Barbara Ghaleb who, working under the supervision of David Harris of University College London, undertook PhD research on fish remains excavated from huge midden deposits associated with the ancestral village site of Goemu on Mabuyag Island, located in the central western part of Torres Strait.<sup>14</sup> Goemu middens were not your usual midden deposits. When Barbara Ghaleb and David Harris mapped the site in detail in 1985, they recorded midden deposit over an area of two hectares (fig. 4). Significantly, some 2 per cent of the village area featured around 100 discrete midden mounds. While most mounds were circular, a metre or two in diameter and less than 30 centimetres in height, a number of low linear mound features up to 35 metres in length were also present (fig. 5). Excavations by Ghaleb and Harris focused on the mounded middens, specifically circular midden Mound 87 and the linear mound complex located at the northern end of the village. Bottle glass at the base of Mound 87 suggested construction after European contact. Radiocarbon dating of the linear mounds suggested formation within the past 600 years. The mounded middens contained what would be considered typical midden materials for Torres Strait — shells, cooking stones, stone and shell artefacts, and bones of dugong, turtle, and fish.

Ghaleb had immersed herself in Haddon's Torres Strait volumes and was keenly aware of the rich ceremonial and ritual life of Torres Strait Islanders. Frustratingly, Haddon, who had himself visited Goemu village in 1898, made no mention of the midden mounds. Yet Ghaleb sensed that there was something, to use her phrase, — 'out of the ordinary' — about the mounded middens at Goemu.<sup>15</sup> She went on to state that 'it does not seem unreasonable to view (some of) the midden features ... as representing loci of past ceremonial activity in addition to economic activities'<sup>16</sup> and

concluded that 'it seems conceivable that many of the ... discrete mounds may represent past "shrines" which symbolised some sort of power or magic'.<sup>17</sup> Ghaleb found it impossible to say anything more about the ceremonial nature of midden mounds at Goemu because she was, in a sense, in a theoretical no man's land: no other archaeologists in Australia or elsewhere had attempted to account for such 'out of the ordinary' midden mounding practices. Indeed, when I began my archaeological research in Torres Strait in 1996, the theoretical ground had developed little since Ghaleb completed her PhD. At the time, I did not pursue this theoretical issue as I had other immediate concerns. But ten years later I returned to Goemu to undertake my own set of excavations of midden mounds, armed with a new set of theoretical ideas that allowed me to make

(below)

Fig. 4. Southeast coast of Mabuyag Island and the ancestral village site of Goemu (centre), 2008.

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Fig. 5. Midden Mound 73, Goemu village, Mabuyag, 2008.

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(above)

Fig. 6. Ubarau zogo shrine for wangai fruits, lama (Yam Island), central Torres Strait. Photo by Alfred Haddon, 1898, N.23057. ACH2.

COURTESY CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY MUSEUM OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

(right)

Fig. 7. Partly ripe wangai fruit, Burar islet, central Torres Strait, June 2014.

COURTESY DAVE FELL

fundamentally new insights into what I would term ‘ritualised middening practices’.

First, I must describe how I gained an archaeological understanding of the ritualised middening practices of Torres Strait Islanders. This came about as a result of my unfolding realisation that not all food remains were discarded into domestic village midden deposits. For at least the past 400 years, certain bones and shells with robust materiality were kept separate and incorporated into specially-constructed ritual sites with constructed historical dimensions for long-term remembrance and engagement. These ritual sites fall into three categories — *zogo* shrines, trumpet shell arrangements, and dugong bone mounds.

### ZOGO SHRINES

Throughout the six volumes of the Cambridge Anthropological Reports, Haddon makes numerous references to a class of ritual site known as *zogo*.<sup>18</sup> *Zogo* sites are small shrines mostly comprising clusters of large marine shells and stone cobbles, with occasional figurative stone carvings of anthropomorphic or zoomorphic form. *Zogo* shrines were typically associated with spiritual forces and

beings, with specific shrines dedicated to specific types of activities such as increasing or decreasing garden productivity, either directly by controlling the production of specific crops (e.g. bananas, yams, and fruiting trees) or indirectly by controlling nourishing rains and crop pests such as rats. Other *zogo* shrines were associated with the capture of marine animals such as turtles and dugongs. While most *zogo* shrines were located on islands, some were also set up in the sea on coral reefs and were associated with wind-making, making fish fat, or ensuring an abundance of crayfish, giant clams, and spider shells. The shrines were





engaged and activated on a situational, needs basis, by community members through ritual specialists (usually men) employing prayers, incantations, libations, and offerings.

My first introduction to *zogo* shrines beyond the pages of Haddon's volumes occurred in 1999 when I visited the community of lama (Yam Island) in central Torres Strait. According to Haddon, on lama was located a *zogo* shrine known as *Ubarau zogo* (fig. 6). Haddon was taken to this shrine by his friend and senior cultural advisor Maino, who informed him that the shrine was associated with ensuring the productivity of local *wangai* fruit trees. *Wangai* fruit was a critical food source for Central Islanders, especially towards the end of the

remains at the shrine, as do numerous edible reef shell species, including giant clam, trumpet, spider, and trochus shells, all available from the island's fringing reef.

A week after visiting *Ubarau zogo* I visited the community of Warraber, a sandy cay also located in central Torres Strait, approximately 35 kilometres south of lama. Although Haddon did not visit Warraber, I was aware from more recent publications that the island also featured an important *zogo* site for *wangai* trees.<sup>20</sup> On the second day of my visit I was taken to the shrine. Although I could not see any stone figures at the shrine, it did include a number of granite cobbles. This *wangai zogo* shrine also featured a diverse array of hundreds of coral



dry season when freshwater and food sources became dangerously low (fig. 7). So *zogo* shrines associated with maintaining the productivity of *wangai* trees were serious business and critical to survival on the precarious sandy cays of central Torres Strait.<sup>19</sup>

One hundred and one years after Haddon's visit, I was taken to the *Ubarau zogo* shrine by a senior local woman who informed me that the site had been relocated by the community to avoid impact from recent airstrip redevelopment. The anthropomorphic stone figure with its distinctive head, eyes, and arms, clearly visible in Haddon's 1898 photograph,

reef shells, including giant clams, trumpet, spider, baler, and trochus shells — all key marine foods and all incorporated into a ritual installation and not discarded into a midden deposit. While it was clear from Haddon's records that these shrines were well over 100 years old, more specific insights into their antiquity would require radiocarbon dating of shells. Because of cultural sensitivities, such dating has not yet taken place. This contrasts markedly with archaeological research undertaken on trumpet shell arrangements and dugong bone mounds across western Torres Strait.

(above)  
 Fig. 8. Participants in the death dance held at Pulu kod ceremonial site. Sketch by Alfred Haddon, from Alfred C. Haddon, 'The Secular and Ceremonial Dances of Torres Straits', *Internationales Archiv Für Ethnographie*, 6 (1893), 131–62.



### TRUMPET SHELL ARRANGEMENTS

Large trumpet shells up 50 cm in length, known as *bu* across many parts of Torres Strait, were used by Torres Strait Islanders as a source of food and as trumpets.<sup>21</sup> Haddon observed on various islands that *bu* shells were gathered together into special arrangements at men's ceremonial areas known as *kod* sites. I was first introduced to this site type in 1996 when I was fortunate enough to be taken to the famous ceremonial *kod* site on the sacred islet of Pulu, located off the west coast of Mabuyag Island and literally around the corner from Goemu village. In 1898, Haddon was carefully escorted by senior members of each of the major totemic clans of Mabuyag to the sacred *kod* site. Haddon was informed that the most important ceremonies of the Goemulgal, the people of Mabuyag Island, were performed here until missionaries put an end to such practices in the 1870s. These ceremonies included boys' initiations, community mortuary ('death dance') ceremonies, turtle-hunting magic, war dances, and ritual preparation of skulls taken in headhunting raids (fig. 8). Apart from detailed notes, Haddon also made drawings of the *kod* site and photographed its numerous ritual installations, including rock art, to create the most comprehensive archive of ethnographic recordings for any nineteenth-century Indigenous ceremonial site in Australia.<sup>22</sup>

(above)

Fig. 9. One of nine *bu* shell arrangements at the ceremonial *kod* site on the sacred islet of Pulu, western Torres Strait, 2001. Scales in 5 cm and 1 cm units. This shrine was made mostly in the nineteenth century.

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(above right)

Fig. 10. Thomas Mene (left) and Matthew Paipai (right) mapping a *bu* shell arrangement at the ceremonial *kod* site on the sacred islet of Pulu, western Torres Strait, 2001.

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Key among these recorded ritual installations were a series of *bu* shell arrangements (fig. 9). Remarkably, within minutes of arriving at the *kod* site in 1996, it was clear to me that very little had changed since Haddon's visit in 1898.

The two best documented *bu* shell arrangements were described by Haddon as 'shrines' and called Koey Math and Moegi Math. In local language, *koey* means 'big' and *moegi* 'small', references to the two major moieties and associated clan groupings of the Goemulgal people. Immediately it is clear that these shells, that biographically have already been food and then trumpets, were incorporated into shrines representing the dual social organisational structure of the community. But the shrines also had another purpose: it was here that men made the woven baskets into which skulls taken in headhunting raids were placed and housed in the nearby sacred skull cave. Other *bu* shell arrangements at the *kod* site also occur in pairs and appear to similarly reference the dual moiety system of the Goemulgal.

So how old are these *bu* shell shrines at the Pulu *kod*? In 2001 I teamed up with the Goemulgal community, along with archaeologist Bruno David and anthropologist Judith Fitzpatrick, to undertake a detailed archaeological assessment of the form and age of various features of the *kod* site and to determine when this community ceremonial



complex was established (fig. 10). Small, naturally dislodged, fragments of nineteen *bu* shells from seven *bu* shell arrangements were sent off for radiocarbon dating. Results indicate that, overall, the *bu* shells continuously span the past 400 years from the 1600s through to the 1800s. Significantly, most *bu* shell arrangements had a range of dates, revealing that each shrine was not constructed in one go but was continuously added to over one or two centuries. Thus, while some shrines were dated to the 1600–1700s, others dated to the 1700–1800s. In this sense, the shrines were always a ‘work in progress’, slowly growing as different generations of Goemulgal added new *bu* shells. Just as the Goemulgal community was always a work in progress, with each generation of community leaders holding communal ceremonies to help maintain community solidarity and identity, so too the *bu* shell shrines had ever-emergent historical properties. As such, I would argue that the *bu* shell arrangements were not simply a ‘representation’ of the Goemulgal dual moiety system, but indeed an integral part of its ongoing historical ‘expression’. This intimate relationship between *bu* shells and community structure, identity, and cohesiveness helps explain why the Goemulgal community over the past century have continued to look after and preserve the *kod* site. By preserving the *kod* site they are in essence preserving themselves, past, present, and future — it materially, symbolically, and historically expresses who they are.

### DUGONG BONE MOUNDS

On my first trip to the ceremonial *kod* site on Pulu I was not only introduced to *bu* shell arrangements but also to dugong bone mounds. Haddon recorded two ritual installations or shrines at the *kod* site that contained thousands of fragments of dugong bone — they are Koey Sibuy and Moegi Sibuy. As with the *bu* shell arrangements, the bone mounds similarly referenced the dual social organisational structure of the Goemulgal and remain fully preserved to this day. In 2001, at the request of senior shrine custodian Cygnet Repu, a senior member of the *kaigas* (shovel-nosed shark) clan on Mabuyag, we

jointly mapped and excavated Moegi Sibuy to see what it contained and to determine its age (fig. 11). Our mapping revealed over 5000 fragments of dugong bone on the surface and an over-representation of ear bones — which in dugongs are the size of a billiard ball. I was informed that the ear bones had special ritual significance, were referred to as ‘radar bones’ and used to communicate with dugongs as a form of hunting magic.<sup>23</sup> Our excavations revealed a 35 cm deep and dense deposit of carefully stacked dugong bones, dominated by ribs and skull bones, including a level with three carefully arranged dugong skulls. From the number of ear bones, the remains of roughly 250 dugongs went into making Moegi Sibuy. Radiocarbon dates indicate that the lower sections of the mound began forming around 400 years ago, with the upper sections added around 200–300 years ago. As with the *bu* shell arrangements, the Moegi Sibuy bone mound also was formed over time and perhaps over a couple of centuries.

To gain further insights into how much dugong bone the Goemulgal community was

(below)

Fig. 11. Cygnet Repu excavating Moegi Sibuy dugong bone mound, at the ceremonial *kod* site on the sacred islet of Pulu, western Torres Strait, 2001.

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Fig. 12. Dabangay bone mound on Mabuyag Island during excavation, 2004 (left: Andrew Costello; middle: Jen Breach; right: Terrence Whap, senior member of the *dhangal* or dugong clan).

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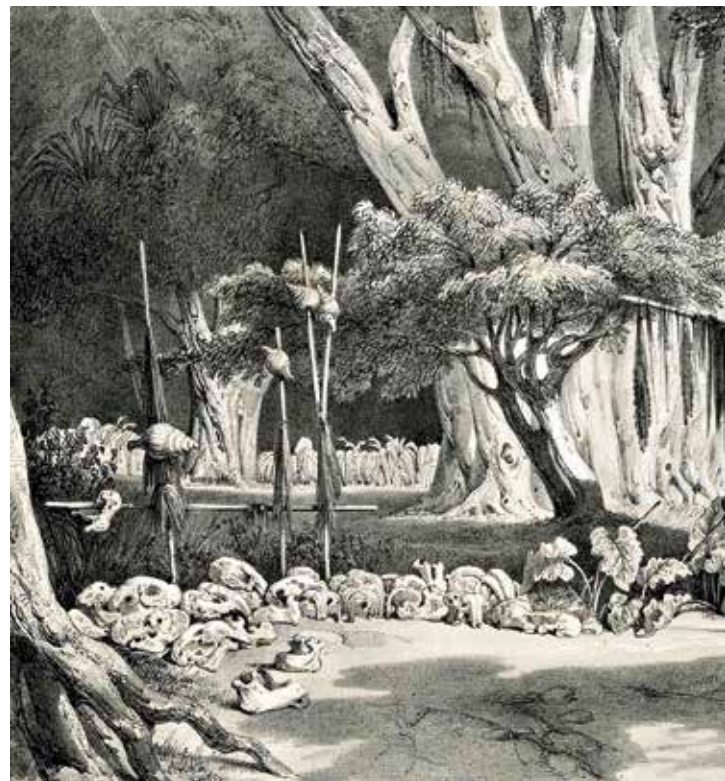


putting into ceremonial dugong bone mounds and not into village midden deposits, in 2004 I excavated another dugong bone mound, this time at the ancestral village site of Dabangay, located on the northeast coast of Mabuyag Island (fig. 12). The Dabangay bone mound is nothing short of spectacular. Our excavations, in conjunction with Terrence Whap, a senior member of the *dhangal* (dugong) clan on Mabuyag, revealed over one metre of densely packed dugong bone (fig. 13). Embedded within the thousands of bone fragments were four separate levels with carefully arranged dugong skulls. Again, as with Moegi Sibuy bone mound at the Pulu *kod* site, dugong ear bones used in hunting magic rituals were well represented in the bone assemblage. Altogether, 115 ear bones were recovered from our excavation pit, which when extrapolated to the rest of the 40 cubic metres of bone making up the mound, suggested that a staggering 10,000–11,000 dugongs are represented in the site.<sup>24</sup>

(below)

Fig. 13. Section wall of excavation pit within Dabangay bone mound showing dense deposit of dugong skull and rib bones that accumulated between c.400 years ago (bottom) and c.100 years ago (top). Scales in 10 cm units.

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Radiocarbon dating of the base of the mound indicated that, like Moegi Sibuy mound on Pulu, it began forming around 400 years ago, with continual additions made until missionary impact in the late nineteenth century.

Haddon had little to say about the dugong bone mounds of Torres Strait Islanders. He was aware that the French explorer Jules Dumont d'Urville recorded extraordinary mounds of dugong bones on Tudu, a sandy cay in central Torres Strait, in 1840 (fig. 14).<sup>25</sup> Following his

own fieldwork in 1888 and 1898, Haddon stated that 'Dugong and turtle skulls and bones were formerly, and often still are, massed in heaps or placed in rows by the Western Islanders; this was done for ceremonial purposes ... or merely to keep count of the number of animals caught in any one season'.<sup>26</sup> Clearly there is much more to dugong bone mounds than keeping hunting counts. At the ceremonial *kod* site on Pulu, dugong bone mounds, like *bu* shell arrangements, were part of the ceremonial expression of Goemulgal social organisation and specifically the community's dual moiety clan grouping system. The bone mounds were also a key repository for dugong ear bones used in hunting magic rituals and I argue that such buried ear bones continued to have ritual efficacy in attracting dugongs to hunters. Even though dugong hunting was and remains exclusively a male activity, dugong meat feeds the entire community and is a high-status food central to feasts associated with important community events. As such, all community members, male and female, young and old, have an association with the bones that went into the incremental construction of these special mound sites.

Most importantly, the special treatment of dugong bones reveals that they were not considered simply as rubbish once their role in





meals for the community was over. The bones, focusing on the ribs used in cooking and meals, the skull bones and, especially, the ear bones used in hunting rituals, remained symbolically active and required special treatment. In a sense, the bones were never discarded but were carefully arranged, stacked, and curated in mound sites where they took on a new and active symbolic role for hunters and for the community as a whole. Indeed, I have conceptualised dugong bone mounds as a ‘community of bones’ that embodied the ongoing emergence of Goemulgal social organisation and cohesion.<sup>27</sup> Thus, dugong bone mounds and Goemulgal society had co-emergent properties, whereby each ritual addition to a bone mound was both expressive and generative of Goemulgal social structure, cohesion, legitimacy, and long-term historical continuity.

### GOEMU RITUALISED MIDDENING

With these insights into the active incorporation of food remains such as shells and bones into ritual installations such as *zogo* shrines, *bu* shell arrangements, and dugong bone mounds over the past 400 years, it is time to return to the ancestral village site of Goemu on Mabuyag Island. There, in the late 1980s, Barbara Ghaleb documented mounded middens

that appeared at the time to be singularly ‘out of the ordinary’ and potentially of a ceremonial nature. It is now clear that the mounded middens at Goemu are not ‘out of the ordinary’ since certain types of food remains such as dugong bones were treated in special ways and ritually placed into specialised mounded deposits that took on broader social and ceremonial functions within the community. So Ghaleb correctly identified the process of mounding as of ceremonial significance. But are there other ritualised features of the middens at Goemu apart from mounding that also contributed to their communal ceremonial status?

The key issue to explore here is whether or not mounded midden deposits at Goemu also fall within the category of ritualised deposits with constructed historical dimensions as seen with *bu* shell arrangements and especially with dugong bone mounds. From a compositional point of view, Ghaleb noted that the mounded midden deposits she examined contained typical midden materials such as bones, shells, artefacts, and cooking stones. In her words, ‘there is little about the composition of these discrete raised midden deposits to suggest anything other than their being piles of refuse from past Islander meals’.<sup>28</sup> What Ghaleb did not appreciate was that the dugong bone component of the middens was greatly diminished because many dugong bones, especially ribs and skulls, had been deposited

(left)

Fig. 14. Ceremonial dugong bone mounds with ribs and skulls, Tudu, central Torres Strait, recorded by the Dumont d’Urville expedition in 1840, from Jules Dumont d’Urville, *Voyage au Pole Sud et dans l’Océanie. Atlas Pittoresque. Vol. 2.* (Paris: Gide et J. Baudry, 1846), Plate 189.

(below)

Fig. 15. Mabuyag Island residents contemplating the Square B midden mound archive at Goemu village created by their ancestors 950–1000 years ago.

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elsewhere in ceremonial bone mounds. Furthermore, the random arrangement of dugong bones in mounded middens contrasted markedly to the highly curated way many bones were carefully stacked and arranged in bone mounds. Different skeletal element ratios and arrangements were carefully and deliberately used to ensure that mounded middens were compositionally and structurally different to bone mounds. Put another way, the constructed distinctiveness of bone mounds relied upon the constructed distinctiveness of mounded middens, and vice versa.

But what of middening practices at Goemu village before 400 years ago and before the tradition of dugong bone mounds? My excavations at Goemu in 2005 included sampling of the linear midden mound feature at the southern end of the village (fig. 15). Designated Square B, the 1 m x 1 m excavation pit revealed a 20 cm deep, dense, midden deposit radiocarbon dating to between 950 and 1000 years ago and thus well before the tradition of dugong bone mounds.<sup>29</sup> As with more recent midden mounds at Goemu, this linear mound feature contained bones of dugong, turtle and fish, shells, artefacts, and cooking stones. What made this older midden deposit special however were the remains of dogs and people. Six isolated human teeth (complete and fragments) and twelve isolated dog teeth (complete and fragments) were found scattered through various levels of the midden. Both the dog and human teeth are represented by incisors, premolars, and molars, but not canines, from upper and lower jaws. I believe that people carefully selected these isolated teeth and deliberately placed them into the midden deposit. No other middens excavated across western Torres Strait have revealed such teeth. Yet there is something even more curious about the human teeth. All are from children under twelve and represent a mixture of deciduous and permanent teeth. In all cases, phase of eruption indicates definite or probable premature extraction. While it is technically possible the teeth were surgically removed from living children, it is more likely that the teeth were removed post-mortem. All of the dogs' teeth are from adults and again probably represent post-mortem extractions.

Clearly there is something unique and special about these teeth — but what is it? Dogs are pets in Torres Strait Islander society and every dog belongs to a particular household and family. With children the association with particular households and families is obvious. I argue that the dogs' teeth and the children's teeth were deliberately incorporated into the Square B linear midden mound to intimately associate this feature with a particular household and family that resided at Goemu village around 1000 years ago.<sup>30</sup> As such, through the process of referencing and remembering the dead, the midden mound was not a pile of rubbish but a carefully constructed amalgamation of items, mostly associated with marine foods, which had an immediate and ongoing association and relevance for a particular household and family over a series of generations.<sup>31</sup> The fact that this midden mound continued to feature in the Goemu village-scape virtually unchanged for a 1000 years indicates that its ancestral significance echoed down through the generations and over the centuries. Multiply this single mound by 100, the number of mounded middens that occur across the surface of Goemu village, and you start gaining an appreciation of the scale, complexity, and importance of midden mounding in the social lives of village residents.

## CONCLUSIONS

My understanding of coastal archaeology, marine food remains, and midden sites has come a long way since I did my PhD in the Fraser Island region in the 1980s. My Torres Strait experiences over the past 20 years have shown me that being an Indigenous maritime specialist involves much more than marine diets and middens as secular deposits of marine food refuse. Barbara Ghaleb started the conversation in Australian archaeology about the potential ceremonial significance of mounded midden deposits with her PhD research at Goemu village. Archaeological investigation and associated radiocarbon dating of *bu* shell arrangements, dugong bone mounds and mounded middens created by the Goemulgal people of Mabuyag and their ancestors reveal that the role of marine foods

within this Torres Strait Islander community extended well beyond mealtimes. We now know that the significance of shells and bones associated with marine foods was not finished once their role in provisioning meals was over. Indeed, the role of these items within Goemulgal society had only just begun and would continue not only for years but for generations and centuries. As such, these food remains never lost their biographical dimensions, with all members of the community, men and women, young and old, having unbroken and ongoing social and historical relationships with the contents of these middens. Is it, then, appropriate to refer to the food remains as refuse and rubbish? Indeed, did a concept of rubbish exist amongst the residents of Goemu? As I noted in 2013, ‘The existence of highly visible midden mounds across the village indicates that certain food by-products such as shells and bones were not considered useless, worthless and unwanted material to be hidden away and forgotten. Indeed, such materials were treated as what may be the antithesis of rubbish — retained, valued, curated, displayed and remembered’.<sup>32</sup>

As an enduring and direct physical marker of marine foods, shells and bones materially embodied not only food that physically sustained community members but also all of the complex social and gender relationships that went into the procurement, preparation, and consumption of food items. Indeed, such food practices were not simply reflections of social and gender relations but also important expressions of such relationships that were central to the way the Goemulgal conceived of themselves in the continual unfolding of life, culture, and identity. In this sense, food remains such as shells and bones were deeply social, biographical, and historical. The fact that these materials were incorporated into specially constructed mounded features and ritualised deposits reveals a desire to capitalise on their robust materiality, to preserve and remember these social, biographical, and historical relationships in a public setting within a village-scape for all to see and appreciate. Yet the creation of these special mounded deposits was, like society and community themselves, an ongoing historical

process and always a work in progress. In this sense, more than simply reflecting or expressing society, ritualised midden mounds and bone mounds were socially and historically generative. That is, mounded features were constructed by the Goemulgal of Mabuyag Island to authorise and legitimise the *past* (by following cultural rules of deposition) and to authorise and legitimise the *future* (by acknowledging the ongoing agency of the mounds).<sup>33</sup> Put more poetically, mounded features were social anchors to the past and social beacons for the future. Built for trans-generational longevity, these features projected an ethnographic echo into the past which would come back and normatively structure and constrain future cultural practices central to Goemulgal identity. In essence, these cumulative mounded deposits as biographical archives possessed a deliberately constructed historicity that explicitly referenced the past and present for the future. That is, the long-term history contained within these mounded deposits was not the inadvertent result of multiple depositional events. Rather, these mounds were constructed as long-term history with each person who deposited new materials cognisant of previous depositional events and mindful of adding a new layer of history. Today, present generations of Goemulgal, young and old, can look upon these midden mounds and say with ancestral authority — this is who we *were*, this is who we *are*, and this is who we *will continue to be*. 🍷



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2. *Long History, Deep Time: Deepening Histories of Place*, ed. by Anne McGrath and Mary Anne Jebb (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2015); Chris Gosden, *Social Being and Time* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993); Richard Bradley, *The Past in Prehistoric Societies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).
3. Similar archaeological attempts to discuss the inherent historicity of long-term use of Australian Indigenous sites in terms of deliberate tethering of practices to places of previous activity concern rock art sites with multiple phases of painting (including superimposition and repainting) and cemeteries with burials spanning hundreds and even thousands of years, see: Paul S. C. Taçon, 'Socialising Landscapes: The Long-Term Implications of Signs, Symbols and Marks on the Land', *Archaeology in Oceania*, 29 (1994), 117–29; June Ross and Iain Davidson, 'Rock Art and Ritual: An Archaeological Analysis of Rock Art in Arid Central Australia', *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, 13 (2006), 304–40; Colin Pardoe, 'The Cemetery as Symbol: The Distribution of Prehistoric Aboriginal Burial Grounds in Southeastern Australia', *Archaeology in Oceania*, 23 (1988), 1–16; Judith Littleton and Harry Allen, 'Hunter-Gatherer Burials and the Creation of Persistent Places in Southeastern Australia', *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*, 26 (2007), 283–98.
4. My conceptualisation and use of ritualisation draws heavily upon the work of religious studies scholar Catherine Bell, see: Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
5. For a general overview of Australian Aboriginal shell mounds, see Peter Hiscock, *Archaeology of Ancient Australia* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 175–79.
6. Ian J. McNiven, 'Prehistoric Aboriginal Settlement and Subsistence in the Cooloolo Region, Coastal Southeast Queensland' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Queensland, 1990).
7. Peter Hiscock, Chapter 9 in *Australian Coastal Archaeology*, ed. by Jay Hall and Ian J. McNiven (Canberra: ANH Publications, Department of Archaeology and Natural History, RSPAS, The Australian National University, 1999); *Multidisciplinary Approaches to Australian Island Pasts: Late Pleistocene to Historical Perspectives on Australian Island Use*, ed. by Ian J. McNiven and Sean Ulm (*Quaternary International*, special issue, vol. 385, 2015).
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9. For an overview of the results of this project, see: Ian J. McNiven, Judith Fitzpatrick and John Cordell, 'An Islander World: New Approaches to Managing the Archaeological Heritage of Torres Strait, Northeast Australia', *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum, Cultural Heritage Series*, 3 (2004), 73–91.
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11. *The Torres Strait Islands* (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, 2011).
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16. *Ibid.*, p. 209.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 379.
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  24. Ian J. McNiven and Alice Bedingfield, 'Past and Present Marine Mammal Hunting Rates and Abundances: Dugong (*Dugong dugon*) Evidence from Dabangai Bone Mound, Torres Strait', *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 35 (2008), 505–15.
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  26. *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits, vol. 4: Arts and Crafts*, ed. by Alfred C. Haddon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), pp. 131–32.
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  28. Ghaleb, p. 367.
  29. Ian J. McNiven, Duncan Wright, Shannon Sutton, Marshall Weisler, Scott Hocknull and John Stanisic, 'Midden Formation and Marine Specialisation at Goemu Village, Mabuyag (Torres Strait) Before and After European Contact', *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum – Culture*, 8 (2015), 377–475.
  30. Ian J. McNiven, 'Ritualized Middening Practices', *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, 20 (2013), 552–87.
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