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The Tides are Turning

Reconciling the Hidden Pearling History of Broome

Abstract: In 2015 Yawuru people began the slow and emotional journey to repatriate their 'Old People' whose skeletal remains had been taken from their Country by collectors working mostly for museums. One group of ancestors were young pearlshell divers who had been sold to the Dresden Museum in Saxony, Germany, in 1895 by pearlsharers. Their bodily traumas revealed the brutal treatment they endured before their untimely deaths.

The journey brought the Yawuru and Karajarri elders and the curators of the Ethnographic Museums of Saxony together in their quest to find out what had happened to these people and to *rehumanise* our ancestors who had, for so long, been treated as objects in the museum collections. This article presents our reflections on the journey back to Germany to retrieve the ancestors, the development of our 'Wanggjarli Burugun' ('We are coming home') project and the findings from our research into the slavery of the early pearling days in and around Broome, Western Australia. It also reveals the emotional journey of our community as they delved into the trauma of this formerly unknown colonial practice of 'bone-collecting', and how, through the spirit of mabu liyan and a process of culturally informed engagement process we were able to address the dark deeds of the past to lead the journey to healing and reconciliation.

This article is written as part of the 'Wanggjarli Burugun' ('We are coming home') Repatriation Project of Nyamba Buru Yawuru (NBY), the organisation that represents the Yawuru native title holders of the country in and around Roebuck Bay on the northwest coast of Australia. Based in the pearling town of Broome, NBY is involved with the repatriation of ancestral remains that were taken from Yawuru country from as early as the 1860s, and has embarked on a project to provide a permanent resting place and memorial for our ancestors. NBY is also producing a film and travelling exhibition about our experiences in this work. Naomi Appleby and Lloyd Pigram were appointed by the Yawuru Cultural Reference Group to be their ambassadors for the project. We have written this article, for the most part, in the first person (or the first person plural). It is a piece written from the heart – straight from our 'Liyan' (inner spirit) – about understanding the journeys of our ancestors when they were taken from Yawuru country. It is also about the resulting emotional trauma that connects Yawuru and Karajarri people, and the culturally sensitive process we have developed as we guide the ancestors home. Sarah Yu is a senior research officer with 'Mangara' ('Forever'), the cultural heritage unit of NBY, and Dr Fiona Skyring is a historian who has worked with Yawuru on their native title claim and cultural heritage projects since 2000.

WARNING – This article contains images of people who have passed away, and images of Aboriginal human remains.

Lloyd Pigram:

Our Australian colonial past is like a spring tide. If we reflect on our recent experiences regarding the repatriation of our Old People and the revealing of their truths, we could assume that the metaphorical 'spring tide' is going out, exposing hidden truths.

In this article, we refer to our ancestors as 'Old People'. It is in keeping with what this article aims to achieve, which is to re-humanise the de-humanised.

Being part of the early discussions regarding the return of our Old People from Germany, it was challenging for me to understand how and what was the right way to escort our Old People home, knowing the confronting nature of what was being uncovered. To ensure that the spirits of our ancestors returning were appropriately cared for, we were culturally sensitive in order to protect what we call 'liyan' (inner spirit). It was important to continue cultural practices, such as smoking ceremonies, and these were conducted by Yawuru and Karajarri people in the international delegation at Berlin and in Perth. The healing of our 'liyan' is a cultural practice that has never stopped.

Naomi Appleby:

Our Old People have been labelled and studied as museum objects for over a century. Now more than ever, I feel it is important to challenge the western historical narrative and mentality, which was written on our behalf. Our Old People are not medical specimens, they are people from this Country. They were born here and they will be physically and spiritually returned to Country as is required, morally and culturally. For us, and for our ancestors, Country is so much more than just land or a geographical place. It is a living cultural landscape, to which we as Aboriginal people have a deep conscious connection. If Country is sick, we are sick. When we refer to Country, we are speaking of 'Buru' and the interconnected relationship between people and place through language, law, identity and spirituality. The 'Bugarrigarra' (dreaming/deep history) connects us to our Country, it connects us to each other through our cultural kinships, and continues to guide us through our ongoing cultural obligations to care for our birthplace, because that is where we will return after death. The theft of our ancestors from Country was a heinous crime against humanity and a disruption to our ancestors' spirits and our Country's health.

The reconciliation journey

For many years the people of the west Kimberley region have been repatriating their ancestors whose remains had been held primarily in state and national depositories. For the most part, these ancestral remains had been taken from lonely graves around the fringes of towns or in remote coastal locations. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, many human remains were taken to add to the collections of state, national and overseas museums.

To date, only a few have been returned. In 2015, Yawuru representatives met with Neil Carter, the repatriation officer for the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Committee (KALACC), the organisation that has been holding a number of our ancestors until such time as we had a place to lay them to rest. With very little information about each of the ancestors, Yawuru elders decided to seek support and funds to develop a communal memorial and resting place that could house all ancestors taken from their country and, if without provenance, from the general west Kimberley region.

What unfolded after 2015 was a succession of events that led to the location of several ancestors whose remains were physical evidence of the violent colonial encounter with European settlers, from the time of first contact in the 1860s, through to the pearling era of the 1870s and 1880s. This happened at a serendipitous time, when Yawuru people were able to negotiate with the Shire of Broome for a secure resting place for the ancestors to be located within the Broome cemetery.

For the Yawuru elders, the realisation and understanding of the immorality that lay at the root of the removal of ancestral remains began in 2016, when Birgit Scheps-Bretschneider, of the Ethnographic Museum of Saxony, contacted Sarah Yu at NBY and provided a report that she had titled, 'The Old People of Roebuck Bay'. This report told the story of how, in the mid-1890s, the remains of several men, women and children had been taken from Roebuck Bay and sold by a prominent Broome pearler and businessman, Arthur Male, to the Museum für Völkerkunde in Dresden. From the forensic investigations detailed in the report,

it was evident that several of these people had been pearl shell divers and all had suffered physical trauma during their short lifetimes. This was the first time that our elders had come face to face with the one of the many harsh realities of the colonial encounter – the stealing and illegal removal of our ancestors.

What unfolded as our elders and community confronted the evidence of grave robbing on Yawuru country, an activity that had been mostly hidden from the public gaze, has been a remarkable emotional journey of healing so far. It is a journey that has brought the living community in touch with the trauma of their colonial past. By following cultural protocols that are founded in the Yawuru concept of ‘mabu liyan’ (good feeling, well-being) the community is finding resolution and reconciliation of this painful past.

As Neil Carter commented, when discussing the trajectory of the ancestors whom he has been responsible for repatriating to their home communities, “You know, we are not *bringing* them home. Our ancestors are *finding* their way home”.¹

Dianne Appleby, one of our elders who participated in the repatriation of our ancestors from Germany, recently reflected, “This is coming alive. They are people. I dream of them. They can smell us when we are there. We must bring ‘gun-gurra’ (smoke) so that they know who we are – we are countrymen”.²

It was this understanding that our ancestors were speaking to us, that informed our sense of obligation to facilitate their journey home. We therefore named our project, ‘Wanggajarli Burugun’, meaning ‘We are coming home’. This paper retraces this journey as we continue to find answers to the questions of how and why the removal of ancestors was allowed to happen. Our elders were genuinely confused about this, as they could not understand in any moral or cultural way why strangers would steal their Old People. Doris Edgar, now passed, asked her daughter, Dianne Appleby this question. Here is Dianne Appleby’s account of that conversation:

I said “mum, they took the ‘ganyji’” (bones from our country). She gently turned to ask me “what for they take ‘em away in the first place? What you mean they bring ‘em back?” Her weary eyes had a gentle glance of despair as she paused for an answer, as my challenge became surreal to explain the unforgiving actions of the past.

I was never going to bring closure for her as an elder. My mother was confused by this horrific behaviour and the evil intentions; to remove a loved one from their resting place is an unspeakable crime. A crime that went unpunished. A crime that was consented and encouraged for their glorious display on a mantle. To delight in a conversation on how such a journey would make them much more astute than the average sea farer or explorer, collecting our ‘ganyji’ as though we were flora and fauna. We have to talk about the tragedy and the trauma, and to make sense of these events.³

Finding our stolen ancestors

Scheps-Bretschneider, curator of the State Ethnographic Collections of Saxony, and the Anthropological Collection in the Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, was in charge of collections of about 5,000 human remains of Indigenous peoples

1 Neil Carter, KALACC, in meeting with NBY representatives, 2015.

2 Dianne Appleby, pers comm with Naomi Appleby, 2019.

3 Dianne Appleby, pers comm with Naomi Appleby, 2020.

that had been taken from around the world.⁴ They were registered as objects in ethnographic and scientific collections.

Michael Pickering, curator from the National Museum of Australia, explained the process of what he refers to as translating ‘subjects’, that is Aboriginal people and their cultural heritage, into ‘objects’ in museum collections:

Indigenous human remains in museum collections are often treated as if they are unique objects in their own right; their significance only beginning when they enter the precincts of the collecting institution. As Indigenous people are translated into museum objects the humanistic attributes of the remains, such as the history of the lives and cultures of the individuals, and the processes behind the collection and subsequent management of the remains, are ignored. The stories are lost.⁵

Scheps-Bretschneider began the task of what she termed ‘re-humanising’ the collection and piecing together the stories of the ancestors in her care. Her first step was to have these remains re-classified as human beings rather than as ‘objects’ of the museum’s scientific collection, to facilitate their deaccession. This then enabled the legal deregistration of the ancestral remains from the museum’s collection, and for their repatriation to their home countries. She then began the slow process of identifying and collating all the materials associated with each of the remains and piecing together their life stories. In the museum archives, Scheps-Bretschneider found a record for the purchase of a collection of ancestral remains from Roebuck Bay from Arthur Male of Broome. The sale was registered with the museum in 1895.⁶

In the 1870s and early 1880s, as the pioneer pastoralists were beginning to occupy the fertile Fitzroy River country, pearlery from Cossack on the north west coast had located the pearling beds of ‘*Pinctada maxima*’, the largest and whitest pearl shell in the world, in Roebuck Bay.⁷ Conveniently located adjacent to a ready supply of fresh water and wood, and the shelter of the mangrove-lined Dampier Creek, this area known as ‘Burrugun’ to the Yawuru people, was destined to become the pearling port of Broome. Although we have not found written accounts of these first encounters between Yawuru people and the pearlery, one of whom was the notorious Duncan McRae, we can assume that McRae and other early pearlery would have been interested in getting Yawuru men to work on the pearling luggers, as well providing the luggers with a supply of water and wood.

At this time the pearlery operating out of Cossack and Roebourne were dependent on Aboriginal divers to collect the pearl shell. Many pearlery were engaged in blackbirding, or kidnapping, to get their ‘native divers’. Roebourne-based Pearler Farquhar McRae (Duncan’s brother) explained in a letter in 1873 to his father in Victoria,

the natives (sic) labour is very much sought after here as they are by far the best divers for pearl shell and do not cost so much to keep as Malays or any other divers that can be got.⁸

4 Birgit Scheps-Bretschneider, pers comm with Sarah Yu, 27 October 2020.

5 Michael Pickering, *Lost in Translation*, p. 1.

6 See digital excerpt from Dresden Museum Registry for 1900, provided by Birgit Scheps-Bretschneider, 27 October 2020.

7 See Edwin Streever, *Pearls and Pearling Life*, p. 120.

8 Farquhar McRae, Roebourne, to ‘My dear Father’, 6 April 1873, MN 2482.

On examination of the Aboriginal remains from Roebuck Bay, Scheps-Bretschneider noted visible traumas. In her effort to learn who these people were and to find out what had happened to them, she commissioned forensic experts and in some cases coronial enquiries to investigate the cause of death. She sought information about their ages, sex, evidence and causes of trauma, and their post-death treatment. After discussions with Yawuru elders, Scheps-Bretschneider's team began the process of identifying the individuals as best they could as women, men and children, and documenting their personal stories.

The findings were the following:⁹

ANCESTOR	TRAUMA	REVIEW	OTHER
Nagula Wamba #1 Very young male [A2817]	otitis (r), potential infection at foramen magnum dorsal cranial lesions is likely from blunt trauma	It is plausible that a dull-edged object caused an injury to the skull. It can be inferred from the injuries to the bone that the wound would have been very bloody. As both injuries lie above the so-called hat brim line, it can be assumed that they were brought about by an external force or figure.	Signs of mounting Signs of ground deposition
Nagula Wamba #1 Young juvenile male (15-16 yrs) [A2826]	Healed blunt trauma of frontal + hair sample	This injury was likely the cause of violent contact with a blunt object, perhaps similar to a hammer. This blow may have broken the skull. Considering how the wound healed, it can be inferred that the individual experienced this injury about a year before death.	Pencil markings indicating measurements; signs of mounting
Nagula Wamba #2 Young adult man [2827**]	Healed trauma of right parietal; peri-mortal sharp trauma of left parietal	The skull presents several lesions on an area of 5 cm in diameter, which allows the theory that not only violence occurred, but also disease that effects bone structure. The thin bones in the base of the skull support this theory.	Pencil markings indicating measurements; signs of mounting Signs of ground deposition
Nagula Wamba #3 Adult man 30-40 yrs [2828**]	Chronic infectious disease	This injury also was likely the cause of violent contact with a blunt object, perhaps similar to a hammer. The skull was broken at contact. Judging from the stage of healing of the wound in question, the injury may have occurred many years before the individual died. A brain injury may have occurred from this injury, although the inside of the skull was not analyzed.	Signs of ground deposition
Several parts from 7 different people** [2828A - G]**	Finger bones Teeth Arm bones Hand		Signs of ground deposition

9 Cf. Birgit Scheps-Bretschneider, *Old People of Roebuck Bay*; Ulrike Böhm, Report.

ANCESTOR	TRAUMA	REVIEW	OTHER
Nagula Jarndu #1 Female youth <15 yrs [2829]	Otitis (l/r); Hypoplasia of incisors, suggesting 2 times of stress before the age of 6; Healed trauma of frontal + Hair sample	This injury was likely the cause of violent contact with a blunt object, perhaps similar to a hammer. The skull was broken at contact. Judging from the stage of healing of the wound in question, the injury may have occurred many years before the individual died. A brain injury may have occurred from this injury, although the inside of the skull was not analysed.	Pencil markings indicating measurements; signs of mounting; Green discoloration of parietal suggests ground deposition
Nagula Marrgardu #2 Juvenile, too young to determine sex <15 yrs [2830]	Hypoplasia of incisors, suggesting 2 times of stress before the age of 6 + Hair sample		Pencil markings indicating measurements; signs of mounting
Nagula Wamba #4 Adult man 30-40 yrs [2831]	Bad dental health (ante-mortem tooth loss, widespread caries, root infections; stomatitis); Hypoplasia of incisors (suggesting at least 2 times of stress before the age of 6); Tibial bowing + Hair sample		Pencil markings indicating measurements; Green discoloration of parietal suggests ground deposition

** denotes being found in the same box, and most probably from the same burial site.

The summary by the coroner stated,

Of the skeletons with the corresponding inventory numbers of 2817, 2826, and 2829, the cause of the dorsal cranial lesions is likely from blunt trauma. Skeletons 2826 and 2829 have healed cavity or lamellar fractures in the skull cap. Skeleton 2817 shows signs of sharp force to the head. ... All described injuries lie above the hat brim line, inferring that the individuals experienced violence from a third party in their lifetime.¹⁰

Individually and collectively, these ancestral remains expose the truth of the brutal treatment of Aboriginal 'skin' divers by the early pearlers.¹¹ Examination of the ancestral remains also showed how their bodies continued to be brutalised even in death. There were remains representing at least 15 ancestors who, although Scheps-Bretschneider refers to them as the 'old people of Roebuck Bay', were in fact mostly young men and women, and some children. Seven ancestors had almost full skeletons, two others had composite skeletons and for others

10 Ulrike Böhm, Report.

11 Various called 'skin' or 'naked' divers, Aboriginal people were taken by pearlers to dive for pearlshell in deeper waters once shallow beds had been denuded. They had no breathing apparatus or any kind of protective gear, and were forced to stay in the water for hours, continuously diving. Those who came up without shell were often beaten or punished in other ways.

there were only body parts; arms, a hand, some teeth, or a skull. Several had hair samples. Some had been dug up from unnamed graves, others had been macerated, suggesting that they had died close to the time of sale in 1895, and their flesh then removed for transportation. In one instance two ancestors had been buried together with 'parts' of at least seven other individuals, indicating a mass grave of some kind.¹²

Several of the ancestors had suffered trauma to their heads above the hairline, caused by a 'sharp object', struck from above. Many had signs of otitis, a condition of eardrums that have ruptured, indicating that they had been divers. One man had a fracture to his femur that had healed under pressure, suggesting that he had been weight-bearing, or standing up, as the fracture healed. Most showed signs of malnutrition. Many were young adolescents, male and female, engaged at a time when it was illegal to have women and children employed in the pearling industry. They all died premature deaths bearing the scars of trauma and the forensic examination of their bones provides evidence of the brutal treatment they suffered. The final indignity to their lives was to have their bodies exhumed, stripped and stolen, then transported far from their home country, for European collectors and scientists to look at, study and mount for public display. What is also remarkable is that they survived ocean travel, two world wars – the second of which saw Dresden, where the collection had been held, nearly completely destroyed – to finally make the return journey home.

As there are so few records available to quantify how many people were taken and died in early days of the pearling industry on the Kimberley coast, it is in the bodies of our ancestors that the true story lies. They provide us with clues as to how to imagine the history of what really happened, so often romantically referred to as the 'roaring days' of pearling. Although our elders knew about blackbirding, they did not know that the pearlers, and others, were stealing the dead bodies of their Old People as well. The return of Old People from the museum in Saxony raised many questions for our elders; they knew the pearlers and their employees were violent towards Aboriginal divers, but they could not fathom why they dug up their bodies and sold them.

After the process of re-humanising the Aboriginal remains in the museum's collection, Scheps-Bretschneider then initiated the diplomatic process of returning the remains to their home countries. In Australia, an Indigenous Repatriation Program had been established in the 1990s and has supported the return of over 1,600 Indigenous Australian ancestors from nine countries.¹³ This was later underpinned in 2007 by Article 12 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, to which the Australian Government finally, in 2009, became a signatory. Article 12 declares the right of Indigenous peoples which states:

Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practise, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; the right to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; the right to the

12 Birgit Scheps-Bretschneider, pers comm with Sarah Yu, 2018.

13 See Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications, Focus on: Indigenous repatriation.

use and control of their ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation of their human remains.¹⁴

As stated above, since 1990, the Australian Government has supported the return of over 1,600 Indigenous Australian ancestors from nine countries.¹⁵ However, the Australian Government's policy is to send small delegations to return the ancestors. Our elders deemed this to be inadequate and set about raising funds to send their own delegation of Yawuru and Karajarri elders and young ambassadors to Germany to accompany the ancestors home. Having direct contact with Scheps-Bretschneider enabled a close relationship to develop between her team and the cultural delegation.

Lloyd Pigram, guided by the elders involved, was instrumental in ensuring that the cultural practice of respect was adopted when communicating with all who were concerned in the return of our Old People from Germany to Perth:

This filled me with a huge sense of responsibility, as I knew that what we were aiming to achieve was for the right purpose but I couldn't have prepared myself for the emotional energy it required. I knew from the oral cultural transmission process through my childhood of some of the horrors that were done to our people, and it became clear that what was told to me was always true. How I am connected to this story from my ancestors will become a journey of healing for myself, my family, and all who have been hugely affected by this past.

As we made the necessary cultural preparations for the return voyage of our ancestors, the journey to recovery and healing for all parties began. Dianne Appleby explained, "We are bringing our young people with us so that they know the story. Our children and future generations must know their story".¹⁶ For Naomi Appleby, the experience of being part of the delegation was life changing.

We travelled the journey our Old People were taken on over a century ago, visiting the places they were hung up on display, stored on museum shelves, and re-boxed for their return home. There was a moment in Dresden that was indescribable. An emotional realisation of the truth became overwhelmingly real when we were escorted to the 'skeleton wing' in the Zwinger Palace (the Palace of the King of Saxony who collected skeletons to demonstrate the evolution of mankind). Tourists now flocked to admire sculptures and tall historical buildings built in honour of past monarchs. The 'skeleton wing' had now been transformed into a China porcelain gallery lined with gold trimmings and high ceilings, surrounded by glass windows that faced sophisticated landscaped gardens.

The influx of visitors made it an invasive experience, which was a reminder of how far we were from home. It was during this moment we were grappling with the truth that not too long ago, they pinned our Old People up where we were standing. The immediate question I asked myself was, 'why'? Personally, I was not emotionally prepared to hear the answer about scientific-based race theories and human evolution studies. It was a lasting moment of insecurity, and anger. Our Old People were treated as prized possessions by collectors, dehumanised and objectified for science. To us, they are family, who were never given the due respect for a proper burial and died from unnatural causes.

Through the repatriation process, we are ensuring they will never be exhibited or disturbed again, and their homecoming is done in the most culturally appropriate way possible. Despite the rising emotions, it was reassuring to learn that our Old People somehow made it through two world wars in Germany, including surviving

14 United Nations, Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, p. 12.

15 See Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications, Focus on: Indigenous repatriation.

16 Dianne Appleby, pers comm with Naomi Appleby, 2019.

the 1944-45 bombing of Dresden. Our visit to Germany challenged us emotionally, however our hosts – Birgit, Miriam and other Grassi Museum staff – extended warm sincerity and support to their Australian visitors.

We are also grateful to the Traditional Owners in Sydney who met the delegation there, and welcomed the ancestors back to Australia. Then in Perth, which is on Noongar ‘boodjar’ (Country), Noongar leaders and the CEO of the International Airport helped with the logistics of welcoming the ancestors in a culturally appropriate way (fig. 1),¹⁷ as their remains were taken from the plane to the Western Australian Museum. The Karajarri and Yawuru delegation really appreciated the contributions from Richard Wally and other representatives of Noongar people, who are now caring for the ancestors in Perth until they can come to their final resting place in Yawuru Country.



Fig. 1 – Perth smoking ceremony

Others who gave invaluable support in facilitating the journey home were then CEO of NBY, Peter Yu, and Alex Coles, CEO of the Western Australian Museum.

In the process of repatriating our Old People, it was also revealed through the newly developed ‘Return, Reconcile, Renew’ community database that other Kimberley ancestors were held in overseas museums. Gwarinman was a warrior who was killed, beheaded and taken from Yawuru country in 1865, as a result of violent conflict following the deaths of three colonial explorers trespassing on Karajarri country. His inscribed skull, probably taken as a trophy, ended up in the Natural History Museum in London.

Our delegation visited the museum and the British Embassy, but were given a cool reception. Our colleagues in Germany treated every aspect of the repatriation process with great care and were willing to do as much as possible to help, to educate, to train and to work with us. Unfortunately, this was not our experience at the Natural History Museum in London. The Yawuru and Karajarri delegation returned to Australia, determined to find out as much as possible about the stories behind these removals. We began our research in the archives under the guidance of historian Fiona Skyring to find evidence of and an explanation for the trafficking of our ancestors’ remains.

The story from the written archives

Peter Pigram states “We are aware of the massacres on land, but no one really talks about the violence and killing at sea”.¹⁸

17 Copyright for all illustrations by the authors

18 Peter Pigram, Yawuru Native Title Holder, pers comm with Lloyd Pigram, 2018.

On 11 October 1864, the Roebuck Bay Pastoral and Agricultural Association was formed at a meeting of shareholders in Perth, the colony's capital and approximately 2,000 kilometres south of Yawuru country. The company sought to establish a sheep station south of Roebuck Bay, in Yawuru country. This short-lived enterprise, from 1864 to 1866, was the first and very violent contact between colonists and Yawuru people that stem from the events that took place in Karajarri country. The original shareholders were members of the colonial elite, and included wealthy pastoralists as well as men such as Frederick Barlee, who served as the Colonial Secretary in Western Australia between 1855 and 1875, and Robert Sholl who was, from 1866, the Government Resident Magistrate in the north of the colony.¹⁹ In the documents created in the formation of the company, no mention at all was made of the Aboriginal people who already owned the land. Both the property rights and the human rights of Yawuru people, and their Karajarri neighbours to the south, were denied from the start of the colonising enterprise in the west Kimberley. Because of the extreme nature of the violence between rifle-toting colonists and their attack dogs, and Aboriginal warriors armed with spears and 'binyjara' and 'nowurl' (wooden clubs), this period in the mid-1860s is remembered by Yawuru and Karajarri people as 'the killing times'.

Naomi Appleby:

I was introduced to the State Records Office and Battye Library in 2017, repositories which hold colonial records and journals, to learn about provenance research for stolen ancestral remains from the Broome region, and to retrace the movements of the early explorers who came to Yawuru country in the 1860s. The records revealed many names of settlers and pioneers who re-named landmarks, streets, towns, and people after themselves. It was at this moment I understood how places such as Broome, situated within Yawuru country, honours the historical figures who 'discovered' and brutally conquered. My understanding grew of how my family got our surname, Edgar, from the Thangoo Pastoral station owner. My grandfather Kurntika was re-named Tommy Edgar after the owner, Jack Edgar, and was taken from La Grange Mission in the Bidyadanga region in Karajarri country, which was also renamed by French explorer Nicholas Baudin as La Grange Bay. Stories such as my grandfather's are not recorded in the archives, they only remain a living memory within Aboriginal communities. Unfortunately, some will never know their true history due to the dispossession and renaming of their birth names and parents.

Aboriginal people across most of the Australian continent have trading pearl shell, gathered from the Kimberley coastline, through traditional exchange networks for millennia.²⁰ The colonial pearling industry along the north-west coastline of Western Australia dates from the early 1860s, and was initially centred around the ports of Cossack and Nickol Bay.²¹ It is likely that pearlery visited Roebuck Bay, over 800 kilometres north along the coast, to obtain Aboriginal labour and to exploit the rich pearling beds along the Kimberley coast. Initially, pearl shell was so plentiful that it was gathered from the shore. John Dudu Nangkariny was a Karajarri 'pirrka' (elder and most senior lawman, now deceased).

19 Memorandum of Association of the Company Roebuck Bay Pastoral And Agricultural Association Limited, 11 October 1864, Mining Company Records (Roebuck Bay Pastoral Assoc.), Accession 5911A.

20 See Kim Akerman, Riji and Jakoli.

21 See Lois Anderson, *The Role of Aboriginal and Asian Labour in the Origin and Development of the Pearling Industry*, p. 11.

He was born early in the 20th century and his father would have witnessed the arrival of the pearlers along the Kimberley coast. He recalled that,

Those old people had to show them (whitefellas) where to find the shell. They didn't just find it themselves. They came and took it without asking. In the early days people used to do dry shelling. Then the pearlers used to force them to dive, with no dress; kids and all. They used to force them down to get the pearl shell. Those poor buggers had to dive, naked. No clothes. When they come up, if they have nothing, they hit 'em on the head and make 'em go down again. It was cruel what those 'kartiya' (white people) did in those days.²²

While the traditional trade in pearl shell had been sustainable over many millennia, the pearling industry under colonial capitalism was not. In one voyage alone, in 1861, pearler A. Gregory took several tons of shell and pearls, and the first export of pearl shell to European markets was in 1862.²³ The pearl shell lying on the shore was quickly depleted by the pearling masters, and by the mid-1860s the labour was done by Aboriginal divers who were taken out on luggers to the pearling beds off shore. As John Dudu Nangkariny said, men, women and children were made to dive naked, and were assaulted by the lugger captains and pearling masters if they did not collect enough shell.

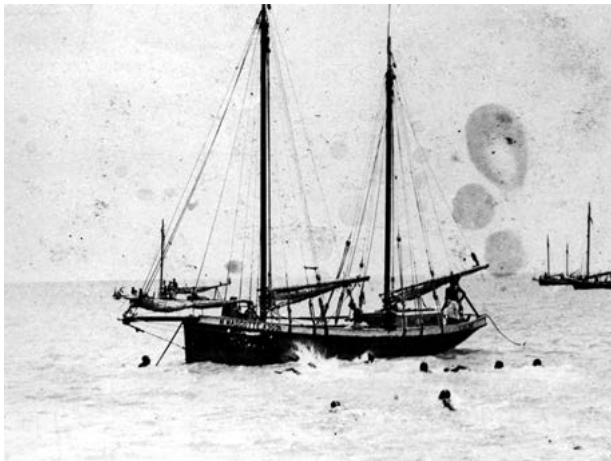


Fig. 2 - Forced diving from pearl lugger

Aboriginal divers were also denied food rations and water as punishment, and were forced to dive to dangerous depths. In 1878, Captain Pemberton Walcott, after returning from a voyage to the Lacepede Islands, off the Dampier Peninsula, reported to the Colonial Secretary, who was the representative to the Western Australian government of the British Colonial Office and responsible for all official correspondence between the government and the Colonial Office in London. Pemberton Wal-

cott reported that Aboriginal divers were forced to work for ten hours straight and were made to stay in the water nearly all day. Further, that,

There is no limit whatever with regard to depth of water ... it is a common thing for natives to be dived in water from 8 to 9 fathoms or 40 to 50 feet - and from personal observation I can testify to the exhaustive and injurious effects of this deep diving.²⁴

Members of the Western Australian government at the highest level were well aware that abuses against Aboriginal people were rife in the pearling industry. And they told the British Colonial Office in the Governor's despatches. People were kidnapped, and forced to go diving on the luggers (fig. 2), and there were reports of women and girls being forced to dive as well as being sexually assaulted

22 Interview with John Dudu Nangkariny, Bidyandanga, 16 February 1999.

23 See Lois Anderson, *The Role of Aboriginal and Asian Labour*, p. 11.

24 13 July 1878, Captain Walcott to Colonial Secretary, Acc 527, Item 235.

by the lugger captains and their white employees.²⁵ The government introduced the 'Pearl Shell Fishery Act' in 1871 in order to "prevent the mischiefs" in relation to Aboriginal employment in the industry. The Act prohibited women from being on board pearling luggers, and required that Aboriginal divers be paid an agreed wage for a stipulated period of time, and that their employment contracts be signed in the presence of a Justice of the Peace.²⁶ The lugger captains were also required to take people back to their traditional country at the end of the pearling season.

But widespread corruption meant that the laws were regularly flouted. In a confidential despatch on 1 March 1873 from Frederick Weld, the Governor of Western Australia, to the Secretary of State for the Colonies in London, Weld included information from Sup-Inspector Piesse, who had recently returned from the northern pearling beds:

He [Piesse] does not doubt that native men and women are kidnapped being inveigled on board boats and carried off, that the agreements are only a sham and that practically they are taken into slavery, he even believes that natives are transferred by sale, and that if the natives tried to escape he doubts not but that they would be shot... Piesse has not been able to get proof sufficient to prosecute because the whites will not give evidence against one another ... there can be no doubt atrocious crimes have been committed.²⁷

But the abuses continued, and nearly a decade later, on 1 March 1881, the Governor again wrote to the Secretary of State for the Colonies. The Governor reported that even making "allowances for exaggeration", the pearling industry in the north of the colony and the treatment of Aboriginal divers was "a state of things little short of slavery".²⁸ Humanitarian activist David Carley, an ex-convict who had arrived at Roebourne in 1872, claimed to be an eye-witness to "murder, rapine and slavery" in the north-west. He said that Aboriginal divers were kidnapped, then bought and sold, and that it was "a common thing" to sell a pearling lugger for three times its value because it included the price of the Aboriginal divers on board.²⁹

Murder and assault of Aboriginal people in the pearling industry were able to continue unabated for nearly two decades because of corruption in colonial Western Australia. The pearling masters and the officials supposed to be regulating the industry were in collusion, and were often the same people. For instance, Resident Magistrate Robert Sholl at Roebourne, near Cossack, had the task of ensuring that Aboriginal divers were not coerced into working on the luggers. But he was accused of assisting the pearlers to force Aboriginal men to sign agreements. Sholl's two sons were pearlers, and in 1873 the Governor reported to the Secretary of State in London that Sholl threatened Aboriginal people with imprisonment if they did not sign agreements to work on his sons' luggers. Sholl

25 See John Bailey, *The White Divers of Broome*, pp. 25-28.

26 See Pearl Shell Fishery Act 1871, (34 Vict. No. 14).

27 1 March 1873, Vol I 1869-1885, Governor Weld to the Secretary of State, Colonial Office, London, Governor's Confidential Dispatches, Acc 390, WAS 1174, Item 47, p. 26.

28 9 March 1881, Despatch No 45 from the Governor of WA to the Secretary of State, in: *Pearl Shell Fisheries Regulations, Cons 1067 1881/014* (2).

29 *Papers Respecting the Treatment of Aboriginal Natives in Western Australia*, presented to the Legislative Council, Acc 993; 344/1933.

resisted attempts to remove him from office because, as Governor Weld claimed, Sholl was making “a small fortune” from pearling with his sons.³⁰ In 1883, Lance Corporal Payne in the Kimberley reported that Special Constable James Kelly, the government official in charge of the Lacepede Islands, “gets some good presents from the Pearlers” to turn a blind eye to kidnapping of Aboriginal people and their imprisonment on the treeless island.³¹ In 1884, F. Pearce, a Justice of the Peace responsible for upholding the pearl shell fisheries regulations, sold one of his luggers for more than double its value because the sale price included the ten Aboriginal divers on board.³² Pearce was also accused of threatening Aboriginal people with imprisonment if they did not go diving. Fisheries Inspector Blair Mayne who, like Sholl and Pearce, was supposed to uphold the law in relation to Aboriginal employment in the pearling industry, was also a pearler. Mayne was in partnership with pearler John McRae, and far from protecting Aboriginal people he actually forced Aboriginal men to sign to work on McRae’s lugger, the ‘Dawn’.³³ In 1886, three Aboriginal divers were so desperate to escape McRae’s beatings and ill treatment that they jumped overboard and swam to shore. Billy alias Buggegurra told Colonel Angelo, then Resident Magistrate at Roebourne, of men being tied to the lugger’s rigging and denied food and water.³⁴

The perpetrators of slavery and abuse in the pearling industry were not marginalised individuals, but leading citizens of the colony acting together. Thomas Lockyer and his sons had a station near Roebourne, and the Lockyer brothers were accused of selling Aboriginal men to the pearlers for £8 per head, and of kidnapping Aboriginal girls “as slaves for their own use”. The Lockyers employed Thomas Mountain and Topin to “round up” Aboriginal men, “like cattle”.³⁵ In 1880 a summons was issued for Mountain’s arrest for kidnapping 16 Aboriginal men and bringing them to Roebourne in chains. But the police could not locate Mountain and considered it was too expensive to hold and feed the Aboriginal men as witnesses, so Mountain was never charged.

The Aboriginal men were then signed to work for pearler John McRae on his lugger, even though the police knew that the men had been kidnapped.³⁶ By 1883 Thomas Mountain was reported to be in the Kimberley, working for pastoral station owner William Marmion, and that he was “noted for kidnapping Natives”.³⁷ Mountain was among the group of pearlers from Cossack who were reported in 1883 to, “have been in the habit of coming on the Fitzroy and Meda Rivers and

30 1 March 1873, Vol I 1869-1885, Governor Weld to the Secretary of State, Colonial Office, London, Governor’s Confidential Dispatches, Acc 390, WAS 1174, Item 47, p. 26.

31 15 September 1883 Lance Corporal Payne Report, in: ‘Detailed Police Reports from Stations in the Kimberley District’, Cons 129, 1883/0856.

32 See 11 January 1886, David Carley Perth, Western Australia, to Secretary of State, in: Cons 993, 1933/0344, Part 1.

33 See Report from Colonel Angelo, Government Resident, Roebourne, 14 October 1886, Acc 1172; 24, Vol 3; C49/1886.

34 See *ibid.*

35 5 January 1905, from Eliza Tracey to Dr Roth, in: Ill treatment of natives.

36 See 12 Oct 1880 from Sergeant Houlahan to Roebourne Station, in: Roebourne - 16 Aboriginal witnesses released to go pearling due to inability to serve a summons on T W Mountain for bringing in Natives in chains.

37 25 June 1883 Report from Lance Corporal Payne, Cons 129, 1883/0856.

kidnapping the Natives and chaining them by the neck until they get them to the port".³⁸

The McRae family, originally from Scotland, had land holdings in Victoria, and brothers Alexander, Duncan, John and Farquhar established stations on the Ashburton River in the Pilbara region, and at Roebourne and Cossack. It was from these ports that Duncan and John [Jack] McRae operated their pearling luggers, the 'Dawn' and the 'Amy'. Duncan McRae was credited by fellow pearling master Edwin Streeter with being "the fortunate discoverer of the wealth of Roebuck Bay", probably in the mid-1870s.³⁹ By early 1882 the McRae brothers were taking large amounts of shell from Roebuck Bay; in one trip Duncan had 30 tons of shell on the 'Dawn' and Jack much the same on his lugger, the 'Amy'.⁴⁰ Jack estimated their 1882 season tonnage of shell to be worth about £400, which was a huge sum at the time.

All of the diving work on the luggers was done by Aboriginal crew, and it seemed that the McRaes obtained their labour the same way that many of their fellow pearlmen did – by force. Farquhar McRae at Roebourne wrote to his sister in July 1878 that Duncan was "out in the bush just now he is hunting up some of the natives for pearling".⁴¹ Many of the divers on the McRae luggers came from the Ashburton area, but may have included men kidnapped from other areas. In the registers of 'native agreements' from 1881 and 1884, it showed that men from Roebuck Bay were signed to work on luggers, along with men from Beagle Bay, the Fitzroy River and La Grange Bay in Karajarri country. In 1881, there were 18 men from Roebuck Bay who signed agreements to work on pearling luggers owned by Henry Hunter and James Ellery. Yawuru man Mullabar alias Monday from Roebuck Bay, who worked for Henry Hunter in 1881, may have been the same Monday who was left to drown a year later, in 1882, by the McRae's employee Jack Wells.⁴² (see below) Ellery signed eleven Yawuru men to work for him in the 1882 pearling season, and the following year he signed at least 20 Yawuru men to dive from his luggers.⁴³

Most of the agreements for these men were witnessed by Captain Blair Mayne, whose reputation for forcing Aboriginal men to work on the luggers was addressed in the paragraphs above. Cowan and Co. signed 41 Karajarri men from La Grange Bay to work the 1883-1884 pearling season and one of these, a boy recorded as Gnobandejoora alias Charlie, was described by Fisheries Inspector E. H. Lawrence as "too young to dive but engaged to dive as pearl shell cleaner".⁴⁴ John McRae and his brother Farquhar signed 37 Aboriginal men to work for them in 1883, and John McRae in partnership with Clarkson signed 41 Aboriginal men, but where these men were from is not recorded in the archive.⁴⁵ Whether these archival documents tell the full story is debatable. No women and children

38 Ibid.

39 Edwin Streeter, *Pearls and Pearling Life*, p. 120. Though Duncan does not write about the event in his letters to his family, other correspondence suggests it was 1876.

40 See Duncan McRae to his sister Laura, 14 January 1882.

41 27 July 1878, Farquhar McRae at Roebourne to sister.

42 Register of Native Agreements for the Quarter ending 31.12.81.

43 See Government Resident Roebourne – Pearl Shell Fisheries Act.

44 Ibid.

45 See *ibid.*

signed agreements, since it was illegal, but evidence from the ancestors showed that women too were forced to dive.

John and Duncan McRae and their employees had a reputation for brutality towards Aboriginal divers, and John McRae was charged, though not convicted, in 1886 of forcing Aboriginal men to work on his lugger. Evidence from Aboriginal witnesses taken by government officials in Roebourne showed that Jack and Duncan McRae regularly beat their divers if they did not get enough shell, and punished them by tying men to the rigging. Billy alias Bangorra testified that Jack McRae on the 'Dawn' beat him with a rope, and on one occasion McRae,

give me a hiding all day. [Fisheries Inspector] Captain Mayne saw it on several occasions... I used to get a hiding and then sent up the rigging ... We never got enough to eat, only a little. We were kept without water up in the rigging.⁴⁶

When Duncan McRae was skipper of the 'Dawn', an Aboriginal man called Charlie was flogged to death by McRae's employee Jack Wells.⁴⁷ This occurred in 1884, and several Aboriginal witnesses recounted the event to officials, but nobody was ever convicted of murder. Another Aboriginal man forced to work on the 'Dawn', Dandening alias Dan, said,

I have been on the 'Dawn' and the 'Amy' plenty seasons pearling but did not like diving. I was in the 'Amy' (McRae's boat) the year Charlie was killed. Duncan McRae was boss of the 'Dawn' and John McRae was boss of the 'Amy'. Duncan and Jack McRae I have seen beating the natives plenty of times with rope and they have beaten me because we did not get plenty shell. All the white fellows on these boats beat the natives. Bob Palmer has beaten me Jack Wells has never beaten me but I have seen him beat other natives. They beat us on the back we have no shirts on...⁴⁸

In another instance, in 1882, when the 'Dawn' was in King Sound, Aboriginal divers reported that three men had been deliberately left to drown. Jack Wells, along with McRae employees Harry and Jimmy made the men dive from dinghies, and one Aboriginal man called Monday was sick and was clearly drowning. Witness Yoanaree alias Jacob testified that Wells ordered the other Aboriginal men to leave Monday to drown, and his body was recovered dead from the water, and buried in the sand on the shore.⁴⁹ Yoanaree himself had to spend a day on the lugger, recovering from wounds inflicted by Wells, and that is when he saw another Aboriginal man, Johnny, drown. This was corroborated by Chilibul alias Friday, who described how McRae's employee Jimmy beat Johnny with a rope.⁵⁰ Jimmy also beat an Aboriginal diver called Cundy, who was then made to dive, but he also drowned.⁵¹ No one was ever charged with these crimes.

Aboriginal people had very limited opportunity to insert their voices in the archive of the written record. Sometimes the Aboriginal witnesses were noted as speaking English, others gave their information through interpreters. None

46 11 November 1886, Billy alias Bangoora, signed 'X his mark', Transcript of Hearings, in: Government Resident Roebourne - Case of Three Natives versus John McRae.

47 See *ibid.*

48 See 15 December 1886, Deposition of Dandening alias Dan, in: Report of Investigation of difference between Colonel Angelo Govt Resident Roebourne and the Inspector of Pearl Fisheries.

49 Yoanaree alias Jacob Deposition, 29 July 1882, in: Geraldton - Reports of ill treatment of Aboriginal natives employed on the lugger Dawn.

50 See Chilibul alias Friday Deposition, 29 July 1882, in: *ibid.*

51 See Yoanaree alias Jacob Deposition, 29 July 1882, in: *ibid.*

were literate, and every deposition from an Aboriginal witness was signed with a 'X' mark. Anything they said was recorded by a white male colonist, and while some men were concerned with recording the truth, others were not. Some, like Fisheries Inspector Captain Mayne, simply lied and asserted that he had "never seen any ill treatment of natives" and that Aboriginal divers on McRae's lugger, the 'Dawn' (fig. 3), were "happy and contented".⁵² No woman was ever recorded in the lists of divers who were signed to luggers from Roebuck Bay and other places in the Kimberley, but accounts indicated that women were held on board the luggers. Most colonists involved in the pearling trade sought to keep their illegal activities secret, and in 1883 policeman Lance Corporal Payne in the Kimberley reported that,

The settlers are no doubt preparing for Pearling, and are getting Natives signed as general servants with a view of getting them signed for Pearling, but are very careful not to inform the Police of more than they are compelled.⁵³

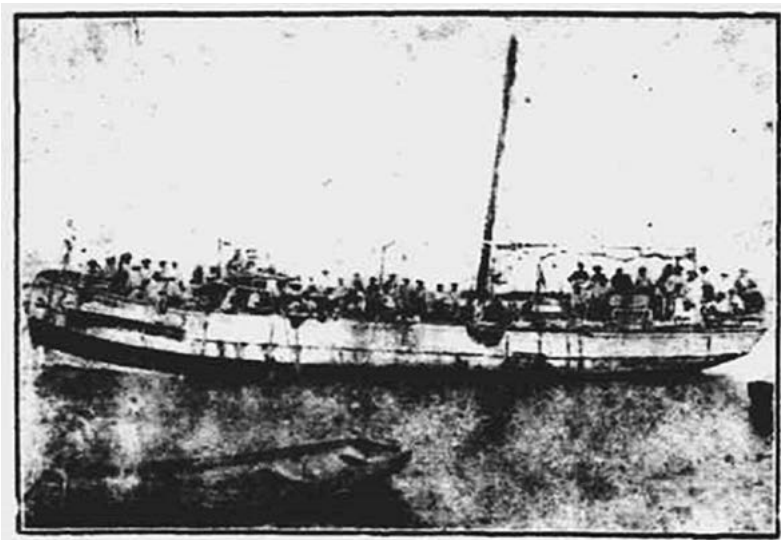


Fig. 3 - 'The Dawn'

Naomi Appleby reflects on the written accounts from her perspective today:

The archives are a place where only one voice lives. Although told through one perspective, it is a reflection of the times and a reflection of the people who wrote the records. Aboriginal people were regarded and treated less than human. Some handwritten journals revealed the explorers were men of Christian faith, who murdered my ancestors in cold blood for greed of land and natural resources, which was not conducive to a Christian attitude.

Despite a litany of evidence of cruelty, beatings and murder, the colonial legal system did nothing to protect Aboriginal people forced to dive by men such as the McRae brothers. Indeed when John McRae was being tried at the courthouse in Roebourne, he had the opportunity to cross-examine the Aboriginal witnesses who had made the complaints against him.⁵⁴ John McRae's fellow pearlers and

52 Evidence from Captain Mayne Inspector of Fisheries, 12 November 1886, in: Government Resident Roebourne - Case of Three Natives versus John McRae.

53 25 June 1883, Report from Lance Corporal Payne, 'Detailed Police Reports from Stations in the Kimberley District'.

54 See Transcript of Hearings, 'Government Resident Roebourne - Case of Three Natives versus John McRae'.

colonists, Justices of the Peace Robert Sholl, J. B. Percy and John Edgar, who heard the case against McRae, dismissed the charges. The only dissenting opinion was that of the Resident Magistrate, Captain Angelo.⁵⁵

It seems that Jack Wells was charged in 1884 for beating Aboriginal diver Charlie to death, but was granted bail. By 1886 Wells was back as Captain of the McRae's luggers, indicating that the case against him was never prosecuted. As Sup-Inspector Piesse commented in 1873, when returning from an investigation into the pearling industry, "the pearl-ers hang together as one man ... they say a native is no more to them than a dog ...".⁵⁶

The bodies of the ancestors tell the story of the abuses detailed in the written records. All of the ancestors died unnatural and early deaths, and some died as children. The evidence of inner ear damage, or otitis, in some of the younger adults and teenagers was a material illustration of what Captain Walcott had witnessed in 1878 as the "injurious effects" of being forced to dive to dangerous depths.

The malnutrition note in some of the ancestors' remains corresponded to eye witness accounts, often from the captive divers themselves, that they were regularly starved by the pearl-ers. And the evidence of leg wounds that had healed under pressure illustrated the repeated stories from Aboriginal men of being beaten, then tied to the rigging of the luggers.

Some ancestors seemed to have been left to rot where they died, with no family and no ceremony to mourn their passing. Possibly they had the same experience as the Aboriginal man called Monday in the records, who drowned in 1882 while McRae's employee Jack Wells watched. Monday's body was later discarded by Wells, thrown under some sand on the shore.

The abuses and the kidnapping and the terrifying brutality would have affected a generation of Yawuru people around Roebuck Bay, from the mid-1870s to the 1890s, by which time most of the Aboriginal 'skin' divers had been replaced by indentured divers from east and southeast Asia. As a way of redressing these traumas, Yawuru have been committed to exposing the truth about the pearling industry through their travelling exhibition, curated with the Western Australian Museum, 'Lustre: Pearling and Australia' (2015) and other oral history projects such as 'Jetty to Jetty'. These projects aim to acknowledge and promote the Aboriginal values of pearling, both before and after European settlement.

Bone collectors and grave robbers

Even after death, the abuse of the ancestors' bodies continued. The story of what happened to their remains reveal the history of the international trade in Aboriginal bones, whereby the practice of 'bone collecting' by colonial gentlemen in Australia fuelled by the demands of collectors in the UK and Europe. As with the brutality and law-breaking of the pearling industry, the abuses of Aboriginal individuals and their families by bone collectors was not only perpetrated by the

55 See *ibid.*

56 1 March 1873, Governor Weld to the Secretary of State, Colonial Office, in: Governor's Confidential Dispatches.

men who robbed the graves, but by the members of the colonial elite who drove the demand for stolen human remains.

It was a grisly trade conducted openly, and in one account from 1909, explorer and adventurer Frank Hann told the police that, “Mr Brockman asked me if I could get him a perfect skull of a blackfellow as he had promised a friend of his in London that he would try and send him one for scientific purposes”.⁵⁷

The Brockman and Drake-Brockman families were members of the Western Australian elite, and included wealthy landowners and politicians. Frank Hann was horrified by the suggestion from a journalist that he might go out and shoot an Aboriginal man in order to provide the requested skull.⁵⁸ In 1905, Durack of Marble Bar applied to the Protector of Aborigines in WA for permission to “secure Aboriginal skeletons for scientific purposes”.⁵⁹

Correspondence over the ensuing weeks between the Protector’s Office, the Under Secretary and the Premier of Western Australia revealed that Durack had already taken the bones, which had been removed from hundreds of kilometres away and brought in as evidence in a murder trial of two Aboriginal men. There was no objection from senior politicians and government officials to allow Durack to keep the Aboriginal remains, and the Minister approved his request.⁶⁰

This trade in Aboriginal remains happened in the context of the development of theories of human evolution and so-called race science. As Scheps-Bretschneider wrote,

In the second half of the nineteenth century, scientific research in both anatomy and ethnology became heavily involved in discussions on evolution. Different forms of culture around the world would be used to categorize different levels of human development, ranging from the least developed wildlings and barbarians to the last stage of development, civilization. Foreign cultural assets were scientifically organized ...

This information was used as a foundation for a proposed general chronology of humankind’s history. The technical level of skill and productivity of a culture would serve as the measurement towards civilization. European society was considered the highest measure of civilization ...⁶¹

This research fuelled an active trade in the remains of Indigenous peoples around the world, as Scheps-Bretschneider described:

Research societies and institutions as well as anatomists, doctors, historians all over Europe and eventually, the United States all vied for a collection of rare bones. Well-known researchers such as Felix von Luschan or Rudolf Virchow encouraged anyone going abroad – colonial officials, missionaries, travellers, and military members – to collect remains from different cultural groups in order to better compare.

Von Luschan even had an instructive guide for laymen going abroad, using the findings and collections in his text *Physical Anthropology*, publishing several editions. The instructions do not include the ethics of a removal, and the collectors are not advised to consider the morality of the situation. A network of traders and dealers began forming; publishing advertisements in sales catalogues and magazines. Additionally, museums sought patrons who financed the acquisition of human remains.⁶²

57 15 April 1909, Statement by Frank Hann, in: ‘Chief Protector of Aborigines – Paragraph...re encounter by Mr Frank Hann with natives... a Native’s Skull’.

58 See *ibid*.

59 Telegram 25 August 1905, Dr Durack to H. C. Prinsep, Protector of Aborigines, in: Dr Durack, Marble Bar.

60 See Correspondence 28 August to 14 September 1905, in: *ibid*.

61 Birgit Scheps-Bretschneider, correspondence with Sarah Yu, February 2019.

62 *Ibid*.

In Australia, the trade in Aboriginal remains entailed robbing burial sites and 'harvesting' bodies. The South Australian coroner in the early twentieth century, Scottish doctor William Ramsay Smith, was credited with providing "numerous valuable contributions" to the Anatomical Museum at his alma mater, the University of Edinburgh. A public inquiry in 1903 into practices at the Adelaide morgue revealed a trade in body parts – mainly Aboriginal – that flourished under Smith's tenure.⁶³ When he died over 100 human skulls were found in his house.⁶⁴

Public institutions also amassed huge collections of Aboriginal human remains, and by the early 1930s the Australian Institute of Anatomy, under director Colin MacKenzie, had acquired thousands of human remains of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders. On MacKenzie's behalf, and for subsequent directors, Charles Murray Black "began ransacking sacred Aboriginal sites across southern Australia".⁶⁵ Black, as Paul Daley wrote,

collected as many bones as he had crates to hold them. The anatomy institute would send a truck to transport them to Canberra (in 1949 the institute had three cubic tons of Aboriginal bones in cases, representing perhaps thousands of individuals, most collected by Black).⁶⁶

In northern Australia it was a similar story of men ransacking Aboriginal burial sites. Heading a Swedish museum expedition in 1910/11, Eric Mjöberg on behalf of the Riksmuseum in Stockholm travelled through the Kimberley from Broome to the St George Ranges and back. In the published account of his journey, Mjöberg described raiding several Aboriginal burial caves, and trying to steal the body of a recently deceased man for his "collections", as he called them.⁶⁷ Mjöberg stole as many human remains as he could without Aboriginal people seeing him, as he knew that they strongly objected to his actions.⁶⁸

Another example in Broome at the turn of the century, there was a Frenchman recorded only as Jules, who had a reputation as a "ghoul" who robbed Yawuru graves.⁶⁹ He was reported to have packed and sent a crate full of ancestors' bones to an address in France, and waited for the "fat remittance" in return. He was also reported to be hated by Yawuru people in Broome, and Jules disappeared after one of his "expeditions".⁷⁰

Although the provenance of the ancestral remains of people of Roebuck Bay in the museum in Leipzig named Arthur Male as the person who had sold them in 1895, possibly Male had already purchased them from the grave robber Jules.

63 See Paul Turnbull's study: *Science, Museums, and Collecting the Indigenous Dead in Colonial Australia*.

64 See Paul Daley, 'Restless Indigenous Remains'.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 Eric Mjöberg, *Among Wild Animals and People in Australia*.

68 See *ibid.*, p. 226.

69 Mrs N Fielder, 'The ghouls of Broome', in: *Westward Ho!*, undated newspaper article, c. after 1978.

70 Ibid.

Coming home

The close relationship that developed between the Ethnographic museum and the Yawuru and Karajarri communities in the repatriation of our Old People had become a key part in changing the colonial thinking surrounding the Grassi museum classifications and their collection. Staff at the museum and the Australian embassy in Berlin were committed to this as an ongoing process that would go beyond the initial repatriation of the ancestors, to a broader relationship through which our stories can continue to be shared. Leontine Meijer-Mensch, the director of Grassi Museum, Leipzig, stated at the handover ceremony (fig. 4) in the Berlin embassy:

I believe in the mobility of collections, that our ‘objects’ are not done. They come with stories and people. By receiving them into the museum, and now returning them, we opened the door to your community, your stories. The walls of our museum are becoming more fluid ...⁷¹



Fig. 4 a & b – Berlin handover ceremony

The Grassi Museum management and curators have now committed to developing an exhibition with the Yawuru community and to training our emerging curators, as we recognise the importance of Yawuru people in understanding European colonial history.

Jimmy Edgar, Chairperson, Yawuru Cultural Reference Group, stated, “Our Old People are now making the journey home. It is important for our people to be back home for their soul to rest in peace in their own country”.⁷²

Nyamba Buru Yawuru are continuing to work collaboratively with the local Government Shire of Broome to develop the Memorial and Resting Place within the Broome cemetery. It is here that we will provide a safe burial resting place when we undertake repatriation of our Old People taken from Yawuru country. We are also developing a travelling exhibition, the first in Australia about repatriation of ancestral remains, so that we can educate people about the past and

⁷¹ Leontine Meijer-Mensch, Berlin, 11 April 2019.

⁷² Jimmy Edgar, during a Yawuru cultural reference group workshop, October 2019.

to share our emotional journey as we come to terms with the past. As Naomi Appleby explained,

I want people to know that this is how I felt when I visited the Zwinger Palace, our Old People we put on display in a glorified glass cabinet of possession ... a beautiful gallery of light and glass that was previously the Skeleton Gallery that exhibited our Old People.

In this memorialisation, our aim is not to focus only on the atrocities of the past, but to reconcile this history in a culturally respectful way, in the spirit of ‘mabu liyan’ – creating wellbeing within the community. Naomi Appleby and Lloyd Pigram stated,

We understand from all the information regarding the study of these Old People that their physical remains show that they passed at a young age. Their story provides us with a glimpse of what horrible times they lived through. In trying to understand how colonial ‘gentlemen’ could undertake such inhumane practices, and justify their actions, we can only assume that they perceived us as less than humans and more like animals.

Chairperson of the Yawuru Cultural Reference Group, Jimmy Edgar says: “They came here and said we weren’t humans, but they were the ones doing inhumane things to us”.⁷³ Naomi Appleby and Lloyd Pigram argued,

As the Project Ambassadors working closely on ‘Wanggjarli Burugun’, we knew how essential it was to have a strong community-led engagement process to build a memorial resting place. We are all descendants of survivors, therefore this journey belongs to all Yawuru and Karajarri people and their neighbours. We wanted to address the spiritual healing of ‘Liyan’. The memorial resting place will be an environment established in order to create ‘mabu Liyan’, (wellbeing) for all, always. This proposed space is so that we can respectfully ensure our Old People’s spirits feel safe and can finally rest. The community, in their own time, have the opportunity to pay their respects while learning this history. It is important, however, that the memorial resting place is not a place to blame or generate hatred. It is a place for our Old People to come home, for others to understand their story and for their ‘Liyan’ to finally rest in peace.

As Yawuru elder Dianne Appleby said, “We must turn the bad into good. We have to show our cultural respect from our ‘Liyan’. This is the first stage of healing”.

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