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Background

Rock art sites in Australia document thousands of years of Indigenous history, stories and cultural continuity, and are integral to Indigenous ways of life. Quinkan Country, located around Laura in southeast Cape York Peninsula (CYP), Queensland, and areas to the north, has a vibrant and unique collection of rock art and is home to Kuku-Warra, Kuku-Possum and Kuku-Thaypan speaking Traditional Owners (Figure 1). A common technique used in rock art throughout the region is stencilling, with stencilled objects, especially boomerangs, stone axes and woomeras, and even European objects, such as metal axes and tobacco clay pipes, making up a significant portion of the region's rock art assemblage (Cole 1995). However, many of the objects used to create stencils in Quinkan Country and beyond have yet to be identified, leaving gaps in the stories that can be told by these motifs.

Research Goal

This study aims to identify potential sources of otherwise unidentified stencils and shed light on the potential significance and meaning of the proposed objects to past Indigenous peoples living in Quinkan Country and the areas immediately to the north.

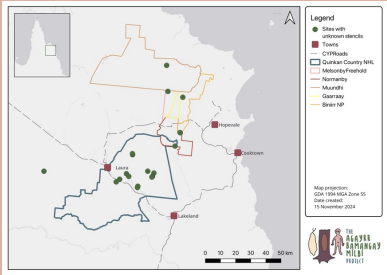


Figure 1: Map of sites with unidentified stencil motifs through the ABM Project area.

Methods

1. Unidentifiable stencils were identified, photographed and measured by Agayrr Bamangay Milbi (ABM) Project team members during fieldwork 2021–2024.
2. DStretch was applied to the stencil images to highlight pigments and features of the stencils that were not otherwise able to be clearly seen.
3. Unidentified stencils were compared to (a) Indigenous objects collected by Walter E. Roth in CYP during the late 19th century and (b) to Indigenous and European/Chinese artifacts from the CYP region held in museums in Cooktown, Cairns, and Brisbane.

Examples of Possible Sources of Unidentified Stencils

The scrap metal scrapers shown in Figure 3 have a remarkably similar shape to the unidentified stencil shown in Figure 2. While smaller in size, the regular rectangular shape of the stencil leads us to consider it is likely a repurposed piece of metal. The sizes of scrap metal scrapers vary widely as they could be sourced from a wide variety of European tools, including horseshoes, ship parts, barrel hoops and tin cans (Harrison 2002).



Figure 2: LAUR00022 Panel 2 Motif 7, a rectangular material culture object (enhanced with DStretch). Height: 6 cm; Width: 24 cm.



Figure 3: Scrapers manufactured from scrap iron, held in the Queensland Museum collection, Brisbane. Bottom Scraper Height: 4 cm; Width: 13 cm.

The overall shape and the dimensions of a wooden mallet on display in the Cooktown Museum (Figure 5) are almost identical to an unknown stencil in the LAUR00302 site (Figure 4). Of importance, the mallet on display in the Cooktown Museum is of the same style that ethnographer Walter E. Roth collected near the Palmer River (Khan 2004), within Quinkan Country.



Figure 4: LAUR00302 Panel 4 Motif 3 unknown material culture stencil (enhanced with DStretch). Height: 13 cm; Width: 33 cm.



Figure 5: Wooden mallet from the Cooktown Museum. Height: 8 cm; Width: 30 cm.

Results

Of 21 panels from 13 sites with unknown stencils, 16 panels had stencils from which possible source objects could be theorised. In total, 23 objects from both European and Indigenous material cultures were proposed as possible sources of the unknown stencils, with 11 of the 16 panels including proposed objects of European origin.

Site and Stencil Name(s)	Proposed source(s) of stencil
BALG00066 Panel 3 Motifs 1, 2 and 3	Cowbell
BAG00015 Panel 1 Motif 13	Clapstick or wooden mallet
BP_AJSE-Divide Gallery Panel 1	Bullock team
Flying Fox (Site 83) Panel 3 Motif 20	Digging stick
Gugu Yalanji Gallery	Stone axes and barrel hoop
LAUR00022 Panel 2 Motif 7	Iron scraper, smoothing board, scrap metal scraper, or metal slab
LAUR00022 Panel 2 Motif 8	Iron scraper, smoothing board, scrap metal scraper, or metal slab
LAUR00024 Panel 1	Smoking pipe
LAUR00219 Panel 1	Hooked boomerang or fishing boomerang
NORM20006 Panel 2 Motif 8	European steel axe, hammer, or pick axe handle
LAUR10001 Panel 40 Motif 213	Stone axe
LAUR10001 Panel 57 Motif 275 unknown stencil	Scrap metal scraper
LAUR10001 Panel 60 Motif 528b	Scrap metal scraper
NORM00010 Panel 2 Motif 1	Che-ka-ra (shell pendant) or jelly/blancmange mold
NORM00010 Panel 2 Motif 4	Che-ka-ra (shell pendant) or jelly/blancmange mold
NORM00013 Panel 1 Motif 1	Unfinished hook boomerang
LAUR00302 Panel 4 Motif 3	Wooden mallet

Figure 6: Table of unknown stencils and their proposed sources.

Conclusion

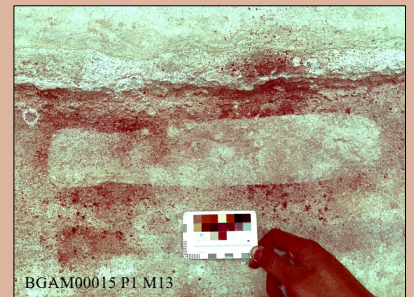
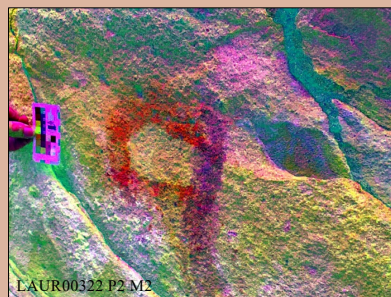
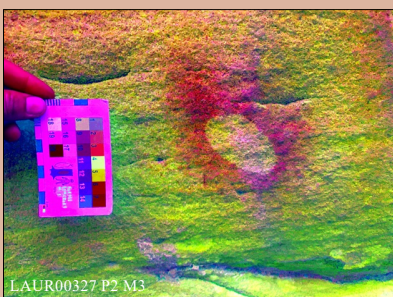
Identifying the sources of previously unknown stencils can shed light on the value past Indigenous groups living in southeast CYP placed on their material culture. The prevalence of European tools and objects as possible sources for the unknown stencils indicates that their ritual and ceremonial significance to Indigenous peoples living during the contact period needs to be re-assessed. Further analysis and collaboration with Traditional Owners will continue to take place to confirm the proposed origins of the mystery stencils.

Acknowledgements

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Do you know what the objects stencilled below are?

The original objects used to create some of the stencils shown below remain unknown. If you have suggestions as to what they might be, we'd love to hear your thoughts.



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 Cole, N. 1995. Rock art in the Laura-Cooktown region, S.E. Cape York Peninsula. In M.J. Morwood and D. Hobbs (eds), *Quinkan Prehistory: The Archaeology of Aboriginal Art in S.E. Cape York Peninsula*, pp.51–69. Tempus 3. St. Lucia: University of Queensland.

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