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PENSOFT

MUSEUM OF NEW ZEALAND TE PAPA TONGAREWA

Connections across the Coral Sea: a story of movement (Queensland Museum, Australia)

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Connections across the Coral Sea: story of movement, first shown at the Queensland Tropical Museum and then at Queensland Museum (December 2021 to July 2023), shared rich stories of cultural movement and connection across the Northern Queensland Coast. The exhibition utilised archaeological evidence from a recent find at Jiigurru (Lizard Island) alongside cultural objects, material culture and specimens, to reveal the trade networks, customs and exchanges that shaped the vibrant First Nations communities of the Coral Sea during the late Holocene period. Using digital components and museum collections, the exhibition footprint covered an oceanic expanse, incorporating dynamic aspects of the geographic seascape.

I visited the exhibition in 2023 at Queensland Museum, while carrying out research for a trans-Tasman project focusing on First Nations cultural collections at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa). Co-curated by Dr Maddy McAllister (Senior Curator, Maritime Archaeology) and Sophie Price (Assistant Curator, Anthropology), working in partnership with the ARC Centre of Excellence for Australian Biodiversity and Heritage (CABAH) in collaboration with the Queensland Museum Network's Project DIG, the project was supported by James Cook University and Monash University. In addition, the Walmbaar Aboriginal Corporation and Hope Vale Congress Aboriginal Corporation supported the research partnership.

The exhibition's focus on the Cultural Interaction Sphere (CIS) highlighted extensive coastal interaction long established over centuries covering southern New Guinea, Northern Queensland and the Torres Strait. Evidence of interaction and movement suggested that the CIS involved about 100 cultural groups from the Aboriginal Cape York, Torres Strait Islands and Southern Papua New Guinea communities, actively trading and exchanging resources across the oceans and expansive coasts of about 600 km in length.

Within the exhibition, a Torres Strait Islands creation story told of a fishing expedition led by a crew of *Zugubal* (beings that took human form when they reached earth). During the expedition, Tagai, a great leader and warrior, bound and threw two groups into the sea, after which they ascended into the sky and formed groups of stars called *Usiam* or *Usual* (the Pleiades) and *Seg* or *Utimal* (the belt and scabbard stars of Orion). Here in Aotearoa New Zealand, we celebrate Matariki, from the Māori name for the Pleiades. Shared stories such as those from the Torres Strait open the cosmological connections between the land, ocean and sky, offering a broader lens for audiences.

Intricate and robust technologies such as the model outrigger canoe *A Nagaga* (Hiri Motu language) made by ancestors from Gawa Island in Papua New Guinea featured prominently (Fig. 1). The highlighted feat of such vessels navigating expansive terrain was complemented by full-sized dugout canoes from Cape York and Torres Strait. The 'Spiritual Connections' section of the exhibition outlined the place and space of canoe building. This included its associated meanings to communities, such as the significant knowledge systems needed for successful expeditions, drawn from centuries of navigation experience.

An enlarged map of the Northern Queensland coastline (Fig. 2) placed the exhibition visitor at the location of interest, enabling a physical tracing of the lines of connections. The diversity of cultures over centuries brought to the fore the scale of movement, resilience, change and continuity. Similarly, the life-sized (1 m × 1 m) archaeological excavation site replica provided insights into the tools used in the field to record and document the Jiigurru site, such as photography, videography, drawings, mapping and laser scanning. Evidence suggests the offshore island use along the coast of the Great Barrier Reef started about 6,500 years ago, continuing right up to the time of European visiting ships. Thus, Jiigurru plays a significant role in the CIS, due to its location on the Great Barrier Reef.

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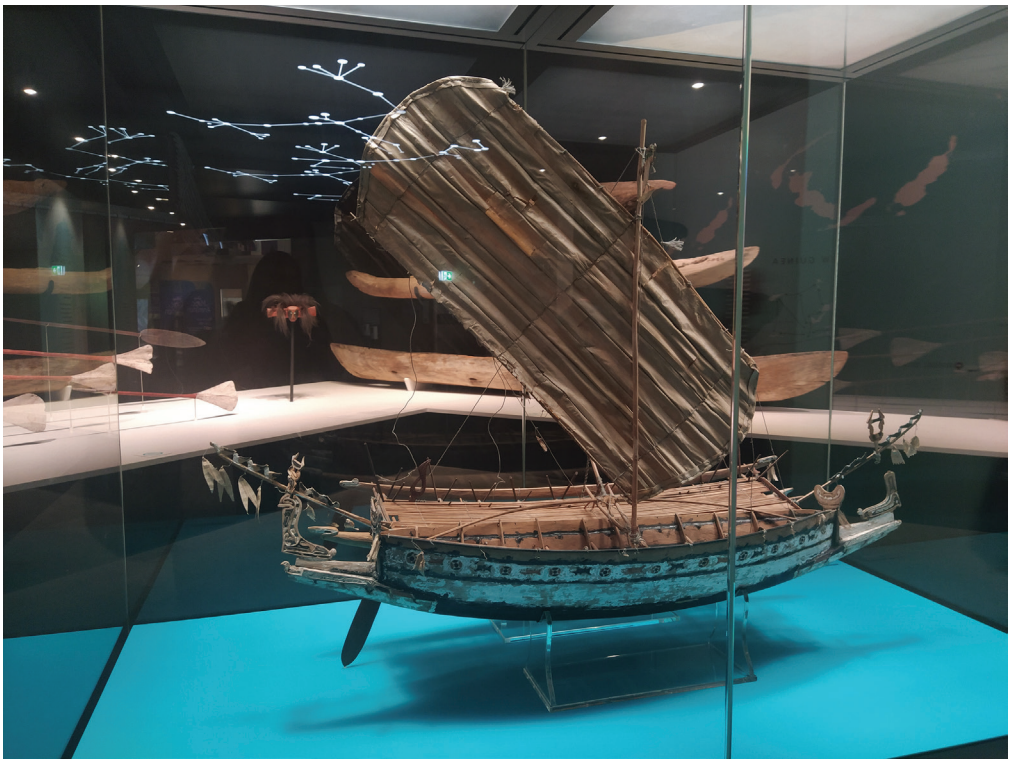

Figure 1. Model outrigger canoe. Photograph by Safua Akeli Amaama.

Figure 2. Map of Northern Queensland coastline. Photograph by Safua Akeli Amaama.

As a sacred site in the cultural practices of Traditional Owners (Dingaal, Ngurrumungu and Thanhil), Jiigurru was a place of collecting and distributing resources such as birds, lizards and seafood, and its creation story is associated with a stingray. Scientific studies of ocean around Jiinguru have identified about 370 fish species (Steinke et al. 2017), while clams provide an important level of aquacultural health (Goggin 1996). Hamylton et al. (2014) note the interest in and importance of capturing how the reef responds to changing tides, particularly with the increasing number of crown-of-thorns starfish (Chandler et al. 2023).

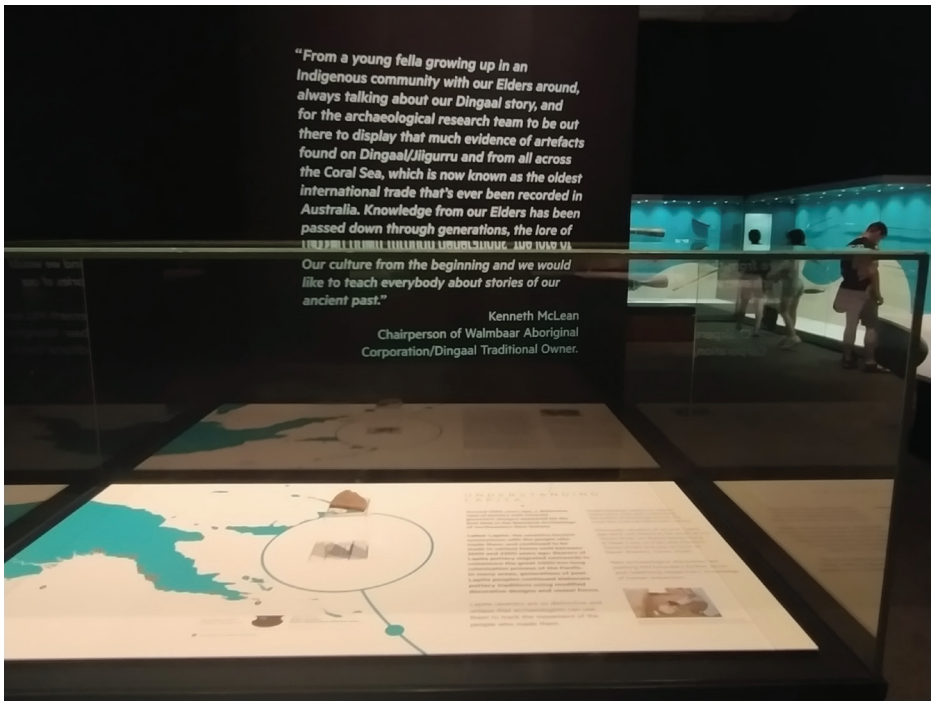

Figure 3. Display and accompanying text. Photograph by Safua Akeli Amaama.

Complementing these studies, scholars have documented aspects of human history in the area (Lentfer et al. 2013). Among the trading tools displayed in the exhibition were axes from the Fly River Delta in Papua New Guinea, which conveyed a sense of the distances, material selection and trading movements involved in the area. The low-level lighting provided an intimate space for visitors to browse these stories across time and space.

The exhibition has created opportunities for museums such as Te Papa to consider the CIS network and the collections we hold. Our Natural History collections contain a small number of specimens of sea snail, sweeper fish and brittle star, many of which were collected in and around Jiigurru in the 1970s. The Pacific Cultures collection holdings of Torres Strait Islands and Papua New Guinea material culture and art forms provide other ways to explore the complex CIS. Similarly, the Aboriginal collections within the International History collection will feature strong connections to the coastal communities.

In many ways, the *Coral Sea* exhibition pioneered the stories of movement between cultures within this geographic space. It will be interesting to watch, over the next decade, the unfolding understanding of the connecting threads across and beyond the Coral Sea. As Moore (2023) noted in his review:

> The Queensland Museum exhibition deals with connections around the Coral Sea, raising implications for Australian and Pacific history, which have been known to prehistorians for a decade, but not by the public or even, I suspect, most modern historians. (p. 577)

As historians of Oceania, this exhibition was critical for exploring these connections, with some displays providing insights from representatives of Traditional Owners (Fig. 3). Sacred sites such as Jiinguru offer up questions to learn more about these complex interactions, in a time of changing tides.

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