



The Bass Strait Islands revisited



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 4 September 2014

Keywords:
Tasmania
Bass Strait
Tasmanian Aborigines
Archaeology
Colonial history
Pleistocene archeology

ABSTRACT

Bass Strait divides mainland Australia from Tasmania (Fig. 1). During much of the Pleistocene, lowered sea levels meant there was a land bridge joining these land masses. It is now generally accepted that the formation of the Strait by post-glacial sea rise effectively separated the human populations of Tasmania from those of mainland Australia, leading to one of the most extreme cases of isolation known on the global scale. The Tasmanian Aborigines were separated for some 12,000 years from their nearest neighbours in Southeast Australia. None of the larger islands of Bass Strait appears to have been occupied at the time of European contact, and the archaeological record sees this lack of occupation stretching back centuries, and millennia in some cases. Some 35 years ago, Rhys Jones (1977) presented a complex model relating to the past human occupation of the Bass Strait Islands. Using biogeographical concepts and principles he concluded that there were critical points of size and distance that led to the abandonment of these islands, with the exception of the Hunter group in northwest Tasmania. Archaeological research carried out since 1977 does not militate against the broad strokes of this model – there is still no evidence for more recent contact between Australia and Tasmania, or for any recent occupation of most of the abandoned islands. There is however scope for a more nuanced consideration of their occupation and abandonment, in the light of more recent research which this paper will attempt. In general, archaeologists have not considered in this framework the latest phase of Aboriginal occupation in the Bass Strait Islands; there has been an ongoing Aboriginal population since the early 19th century, continuing many of the traditions of Tasmanian Aboriginal society. This paper attempts a continuous narrative from archaeology and history of the Tasmanian Aborigines and the Bass Strait Islands.

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1. Introduction

Low lying Bassiania, so beguilingly exposed to the wind ...

Jones, 1977, p. 339.

I first set foot on a Bass Strait island about forty years ago. I recently revisited beguiling Bassiania early in 2013, with an idyllic visit to Flinders Island. Much water has flowed through the Strait over that time, and much research has been carried out by archaeologists, historians, natural historians and others. In this paper I want to revisit that research, and document how humans have visited and revisited these islands from their first footsteps over 35,000 years ago until the recent past. I write as an archaeologist, that is, one who is interested in and concerned about the past, but primarily the *human* past, as understood from material remains. The written past is however impossible to ignore, so archaeology

must be informed by history where possible and necessary, and also vice versa. In Tasmania as elsewhere the present is the outcome of the past, and the present day descendants of the original Aboriginal inhabitants have much to inform us.

1.1. Concepts and terminology

In addressing this paper, I was confronted by a problem with the terms customarily used by archaeologists (including myself) to describe the phenomena we grapple with. We refer to the “colonisation” of Australia, including Tasmania, by the first Aborigines who came here. The term has specific connotations, particularly now in the social sciences, where it implies a form of conquest by one culture of another, the establishment of “colonies” in already occupied territory. Obviously there is a dictionary definition (e.g. Oxford English Dictionary “The action of colonizing or fact of being colonized; establishment of a colony or colonies”) which has a more neutral affect, but the term now carries a freight of other meanings. Apart from the social science usage, it is used by biologists with reference to plants and (non-human) animals (Oxford English

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Dictionary). Similarly the words “occupy” and “occupation” in the modern world have aggressive overtones at odds with what I believe we want to convey. “Settlement” is now a term used frequently for the Europeans who colonised and occupied Aboriginal land.

We are also tending to conflate two different ideas, one being an understanding of how humans first arrived in Australia, the other how they established themselves permanently in a new landscape. The former includes the more mechanical issues of when people came and how, and where they came from; the second is about how these people established a viable and on-going relationship with the land. In lieu of being able to come up with a simple alternative word to colonisation, I will use various permutations of “human relationships with the land”.

It is now well-understood by most Australian archaeologists that Aboriginal relationships with the land were on the one hand adaptive, that is, they allowed people to survive and flourish in the environments in which they were located. On the other hand, these adaptations were manifested and operationalised in a web of social and religious networks, obligations, beliefs and cultural codifications which have little to do with Western ideas about land tenure. The idea of a “land-owning group” differs from Western customs in being communal rather than individual, and in expressing a mutual relationship between human community and country, rather than the idea embodied in the terms “land-holding” or “land tenure”. I suggest that what archaeologists are investigating are the origins of specific human–land relationships in the past, on the one hand tracking their development in different environments, and on the other attempting to describe different forms of such relationships which identify different cultural groups, of the kind traditionally defined under the terms “tribe” or “band”.

In Tasmania, such identifications have been made using the terminology coined by Jones (1977, p. 345), “regionally co-ordinated economic systems”. I would like to suggest that this rather mechanistic and/or cybernetic, not to mention bureaucratic (try a web search) phrase actually refers to a culturally cohesive group of people with a specific and successful relationship with the country in which they live. Tindale in 1974 described an Aboriginal “tribe” as follows.

... the largest [political organization] in which a man can readily share in the full life of the community, imparting his thoughts to others whom he meets with a feeling that he is among his own kind They share a common bond of kinship and claim a common territory, even though the sharing in it may be the subject of restrictions on the taking of certain foods and the exploitation of some other resources may be limited without prior arrangement or permissible only by reason of the possession of specific kinship ties, for within the tribe there are sometimes distinctions between what a man may do in his own clan country, in that of his mother, and in those of his wife's people.

In Australia this larger unit has a widely recognized name, a bond of common speech, and perhaps a reputation, and even an aura of names ... given to it by other tribes people who lie in adjoining territories

Tindale, 1974, p. 30.

This is a workable, pragmatic and descriptive (if somewhat gender biased) view of a “tribe” which can lend itself to archaeological interpretation. It manifests no firm view about boundaries. It is not based on any particular internal structure(s), thus avoiding the difficulties canvassed by Berndt (1959). One would expect such

a unit to have shared religious ceremonies with concomitant subsistence strategies and material culture expressions.

Jones, in an Appendix to Tindale (1974) and working from very different sources, defined a Tasmanian “tribe” as follows.

A tribe was that agglomeration of bands that lived in contiguous regions, spoke the same language or dialect, shared the same cultural traits, usually intermarried, had a similar pattern of seasonal movement, habitually met together for economic or other reasons, the pattern of whose peaceful relations were within the agglomeration, and of whose enmities and military adventures were directed outside it (Jones, 1974, 328).

The main difference from the Tindale definition is in assuming an internal structure, based on a smaller unit, the “band”, which need not detain us here (One might also wonder about “military adventures”). Today, Aboriginal people characterise these groupings as “Nations” (e.g. Ryan, 2012, p. 14). At this point I suggest that these descriptions be used as the basis for something called an “archaeological Nation”, without concern for epistemological realities. It can certainly be argued that this is just a semantic device, but it is one that to me sits more comfortably with the fact we are dealing with an Aboriginal human past rather than a cybernetic construct. In any case it provides a heuristic device for investigating the human past, particularly with respect to the Bass Strait Islands.

The baseline for identifying Nations of the past is our understanding of them in the present. In Tasmania, Jones's (1974) detailed historical and archaeological research resulted in the identification of nine tribes (as per the definition above), comprised of smaller foraging/family groups termed bands. Further delineation of these tribes has been carried out by several researchers, including Ryan (2012), who used the term Nations. Ryan's map of Tasmanian Aboriginal Nations showing their names and geographical extent is reproduced here as Fig. 2. In this paper, I use Ryan's (2012) designations for the Tasmanian Nations, based on Jones (1974), which differ from those used by Cameron (2011). I have also followed in most instances Ryan's spelling of Aboriginal names, which in turn generally follow those of Robinson (Plomley, 1966).

Aboriginal people resisted the archaeologists' concept of “pre-history”, when it was distinguished from “history”; why was it, they asked, that Europeans have history but Indigenous people, for much of their long past, had something called prehistory? That term has now fallen from favour in Australia, as applied to people, and here I follow the more productive concept of a long *history* of Aboriginal life being documented by various means which include archaeology, oral tradition and *history* – in the disciplinary or methodological sense of information gained from written documents.

I am also avoiding the term “midden” for sites composed of or containing mollusc remains. It is considered derogatory by some Aboriginal people (Patsy Cameron, personal communication); it does after all mean literally “A dunghill, a dung heap; a refuse heap” or, at best, “A receptacle for refuse, a dustbin” OED. Archaeological “midden sites” are often places where people lived, not just dumps.

I would like to add a note on the use of radiocarbon dates. In this paper I prefer to use original radiocarbon dates with calibrated dates provided in the text (see also Appendix). It should be noted that all the scientific dates cited here were obtained by radiocarbon dating, with the single exception of the OSL date for the Brighton bypass site.

2. Research in the Bass Strait Islands

Scholars and scientists from many disciplines have followed their interests in the Bass Strait Islands – historians,

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