



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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## BOOK REVIEW

### *#The Teaching Stones*

a very modern myth

\*Kim Akerman

Several years ago in Western Australia I was approached to authenticate and give some recognition to a collection of carved stones.

The stones were said to have been found by Western Australian tracker, dogger and all-round bushman Kevin Cameron. Some of the stones were said to have been found in the presence of the non-Aboriginal man who approached me for my opinion of them.

The stones themselves were beautifully carved, with a wide range of motifs or designs. What was interesting was that many of the designs replicated those found in areas as far apart as the Pilbara and Arnhem Land. Some of the designs can be seen in the ancient and superb galleries of engravings in the Pilbara while others are identical, or almost identical, to those on contemporary bark paintings from Arnhem Land.

The images include a two dimensional representation of the djuan djuan bark sculptures with the distinctive feature of one long and one short arm. These come from Western Arnhem Land where they were set up adjacent to graves to indicate the direction that the rest of the camp had taken after burying the dead or placing the corpse on a platform. The extraordinary range of images on the stones continue with Wandjina figures from the West and Central Kimberley.

My view then, and it has not changed, was that these stones were modern and skilfully carved by an artist with a relatively wide general knowledge of Australian Aboriginal art.

I also recall that Kevin Cameron had "found" other stones in the south-west some years earlier, that time in the presence

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\*At the time this article was written Kim Akerman was Curator of the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia, National Museum of Australia. He is now curator of pre-history at the NT Museum of Arts and Sciences.

of a young student of archaeology. These findings received some coverage in Perth newspapers.

More recently Cameron was reported as not only sighting, but also photographing, a Thylacine (Tasmanian Tiger) in the forests of south-west Australia. The Thylacine sighting received some coverage in an international scientific journal but was ultimately rejected as a hoax.

It was with some surprise therefore that I heard in 1988 that a book had been published in German about the stones and that an English translation was being considered. It was even more of a surprise when *The Teaching Stones of the Outcast Tribe* emerged in the bookstores of Australia. It has no author credit, and is published by the little-known and oddly named Aboriginal Culture Abroad (Australia).

The book is unusual to say the least. The text very simply puts forward and explains some of the more general philosophies expressed by Australian Aborigines, relating them to the objects illustrated in beautiful plates.

There are however glaring errors evident in some of the terminology used in the text - particularly the use of words drawn from distinctly separate and unconnected Aboriginal languages separated by thousands of kilometres. The book refers to mimi, the Kunwinjku name for spirit beings found exclusively in the escarpment country of Western Arnhem Land. It also talks about "the kurdaitcha man", the name of a central Australian spirit and also used to describe magical assassins on missions of vengeance. Achilpa, a Centralian word for native cat finds its way into the lexicon of the "lost tribe", who, the authors say, come from somewhere in the Murchison River area of Western Australia.

From an ethnographic perspective the authenticity of the stones and other objects is suspect in the extreme. Most of the motifs are derived from the artistic traditions of areas far removed from the Murchison area. Many are carved in low relief, a technique rare in pre-contact Aboriginal Australia. A number of motifs show striking non-Aboriginal influence. The representation of a marine creature for instance looks remarkably like widely published photos of an ichthyosaur fossil find from Europe.

The beautifully rendered carved stone "cave painting lamp" is just as incongruous. It appears to be based on clay lamps of the Middle East neolithic age. It is a much finer lamp than those of the earlier European upper palaeolithic. In the Murchison area where it is purported to come from, there have been extensive surveys of rock art and these show no indication of cave painting sites which would require illumination by such a lamp. In the areas where the great Australian cave painting traditions existed, particularly the Kimberley, Arnhem Land and North East Queensland, there is no evidence that the artists ever manufactured or used stone lamps of the kind illustrated in *The Teaching Stones*.

Similarly the elaborately carved "initiation bowl", the "spirit ochre bowl" and the "paint box" are unlike any stone vessels known to be used in art or ritual in Western Australia.

The majority of other artefacts displayed in the book appear to have been purchased from an artefact shop specialising in very new and modern artefacts. The stone axes are hafted not only in a manner not found in traditional Australia but in a way that is totally impractical. The other implements, bone chisels and jawbone engraving tools all appear to have been made by the same hand. The manufacturer is clearly not familiar with real examples of these tools.

The small section on native Australian wildlife implies that the range of the giant perch Barramundi (found only in the extreme north of Australia) extends so far south as to be of importance to the "lost tribe of the Murchison".

If the book is to be believed, the "lost tribe" created a material culture totally unique and separate from either their neighbours or any other Australian Aboriginal group of peoples. We are asked to believe that they drew on cultural elements of other Aboriginal groups thousands of kilometres away. They were apparently a most resourceful people, creating and concealing a culture that has only now miraculously appeared to be generously revealed to other Aborigines and the rest of the world.

For my part, all I can say is, leave it in the bookstore. There are many fine books available that allow access to the rich philosophical, religious, artistic and material world of the first Australians. Many of these are now written either by Aboriginal people or by non-Aboriginal scholars in close collaboration with Aboriginal people.

Finally, I am left wondering how the Yulngu (North East Arnhem Land people) whose photographs appear in the book feel about their images being used to give credence to "law" from another country.

(See also - "Tribal stones labelled a hoax" - Richard Ogier, *The Adelaide Advertiser*, 12 March, 1990, from which the following is an extract).

The book, a copy of which was lent to *The Advertiser* by Standard Book, retails for \$49.95 and is published by Aboriginal Culture Abroad (Australia) Pty Ltd. It was printed in West Germany. A video of the book has also been released.

"I have no reason to believe other than that the stones are recent copies of Aboriginal drawings," Mr Akerman said. "You could call them a hoax."

In a recent review of the book in *Land Rights News*, Mr Akerman said he was asked by an associate of WA bushman Mr Kevin Cameron to authenticate the stones in 1986. It had been his opinion that they were phoney.

Aboriginal Culture Abroad (Australia) Pty Ltd does not have a listed telephone number and the group is not registered with the Melbourne group Thorp, which keeps the book industry's most authoritative record of publishers.

The curator of the Anthropology Research Museum at the University of WA, Dr John Stanton, said he believed the publishing group had been set up especially to produce the book and that Mr Cameron was its "originator", even though his name was not listed inside.

Dr Stanton said he was shown the stones and asked to authenticate them by Mr Cameron in 1986. He concurred with Mr Akerman that they were not traditional stones.

...The book's publisher Mr John Laker said from Perth last night that the stones were painted by Mr Cameron, a part Aboriginal, about 30 years ago and Mr Cameron's father about 50 to 100 years ago...Mr Laker said the stones were now "somewhere in Europe" and would not be shown in Australia. He said Mr Cameron was the author even though his name did not appear in the book. "It was forgotten," Mr Laker said. Mr Laker's name also is not listed.