

mental marks of the body painting, and ponders if this reflects displacement in community or freedom: is it more or less? Napangardi's undulating, gossamer-like, skin-evoking paintings consist entirely of very fine dots that, as Biddle writes, create a complex choreography of movement: ancestral steps that can turn into roads or, to fit into the feminist interpretation, suggest the intertwining of string. Biddle is at pains to revoke the image of landscape in the work of Petyarre whose extraordinarily fine dots create a multi-dimensional visual space that, to Biddle, offers immersion rather than perspective. Christine Nicholls (2001:29) describes Petyarre's work as representing the travels of her Thorny Devil ancestor in a semiotic shorthand that stands for the longer oral narrative. Biddle, quoting Nicholls' earlier comment (2001:10) that the spatial information created in the art can be mapped onto specific geographic features, describes the likeness of these canvases to 'cold flat geometry of map' (p.82). Rather, for Biddle, the works evoke the rhythm of song and the rise and fall of breasts. Kngwarreye's late work, the *Utopia Panels*, takes Biddle back to writing, a writing that is 'seemingly unauthored and meaningless unless you are an "insider" who knows the codes' (p.51). Her work, reduced to the simplest of forms, the line, is to Biddle sculptural, 'a writing of contour and imprint' (p.52).

It is in her final identification of a breasted ontology that Biddle most clearly expresses her feminist Kleinian interpretation of Central Desert women's art. Country becomes infant, nurtured by women whose powerful breasts repaint, remember and renew. Biddle remarks the ongoing context of colonialism in which the painting movements developed but is she now imposing another Western way of reading onto a form of writing that as she asserts does not need or allow for white explanation?

This book asks that viewers of Central Desert women's art do not stop at the dots, the lines and the circles, but look with all their senses and feel the skin of breast, of body and Country behind the canvas.

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## **The First Boat People**

**Steve Webb 2006**

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (Cambridge Studies in Biological and Evolutionary Anthropology Series 47), xviii+318pp, ISBN 978 0 521 85656 0

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The first half of this book addresses the initial colonisation of Asia, Wallacea and Australia; the second deals with the Pleistocene human remains from Australia. The latter part is most worthwhile, reflecting the author's area of principal expertise, and occasionally it presents superb information. The two hominin finds from the Lake Eyre basin (p.161ff.), the discussion of burnt bone (p.171) and the details of Willandra Lake interment practices (p.219ff.) are all very informative and convey the crispness of personal experience.

The lack of such knowledge is noticeable in the rest of the book, especially on aspects of Pleistocene seafaring, Wallacean archaeology and colonisation scenarios. Webb cheerfully admits in his Preface that

This book does not hide from hard questions nor does it shirk from trying to provide answers, albeit that some might think some of the propositions I have made constitute a one-way ticket off the planet.

Addressing experimental notions is perfectly legitimate, but still needs to be grounded in sound empirical data and ample reference to existing relevant literature. For instance, the author toys with the proposition that Australia was first occupied by hominins before 300 ky BP (p.95), but provides no evidence for it. He suggests that WLH50 had been fossilised already at the time it was deposited; again proof is lacking. He address-

es the timing of the megafauna extinctions and their nexus with human colonisation, which in view of his ambivalence concerning the time of the latter event is of little use. Map 3.3, of the migration patterns and genetic mixing through Indonesia, shows the area with a network of lines and arrows drawn apparently randomly across all major islands. He claims that the discovery of *H. floresiensis* has overturned the idea that 'Middle Pleistocene hominids have always been denied the ability to manipulate their world' (p.95). But that putative species is not of the Middle Pleistocene, and we have yet to see agreement among the pundits about its taxonomic status. Moreover, there is ample evidence of the 'modern' cognitive abilities of Middle Pleistocene hominins through sources such as palaeoart, bead use and seafaring.

This lack of rigour runs like a red thread through the first half of the book. For instance, its author places the Narmada calvarium at 400–500 ky (p.17), but in Table 1.3 it is said to be 200 ky. Yet he uses the first (incorrect) figures to argue that this find shows that by 400–500 ky, people 'had obviously pushed into the southern parts of India'. Hominins were in *central* India significantly earlier, and human remains are not the only evidence to their presence. Webb seems unaware of the Oldowan industries of India as well as of the important second Narmada hominin, a pygmy; or that the chopping tool horizons of India have yielded rock-art at two sites.

Although we cannot even know whether *H. erectus* arose first in Africa or Asia, as Webb himself observes (in view of the finds from Renzidong and Nihewan), he develops an intricate model of how Asia was first colonised. It involves 2820 erectines forming a single chain from Sinai to the Bay of Bengal, branching there into two beelines for Lantian in China and Modjokerto in Java (p.20). Webb's pan-Asian relay race comprised 131 bands ferrying fertile females to the spearheads, where males presumably had good maps showing the location of Modjokerto. The book thus descends into academic farce, and while it is entertaining to read, presenting its deadpan humour as archaeological fact may not have been advisable: some readers might just believe it.

The book continues in the same vein through several chapters, replete with maps of illusory migration patterns and routes, and statistics about population movements or densities that are bereft of any trace of evidence. For instance, there were five illusory migratory movements from fictional population centres in India and China, one of them even ending up in North Africa (p.76). Webb thinks that increased brain size underpinned the ability of hominins to move into many regions (p.23): so how did other species, such as tigers and wolves, manage to occupy all climatic zones from the tropics to the taiga without any increase in brain size?

The book's most significant lacunae are evident in the discussion of Pleistocene seafaring. Webb cites not a single publication on the subject, although there are many to choose from. He is unaware of the *H. erectus* bone found on a Mediterranean island that was never connected to a mainland and neglects to list the work of Theodor Verhoeven, who pioneered archaeological research in Flores and discovered the tools of *H. erectus* there. A crucial paper in *Comptes Rendus* (Sondaar et al. 1994) that not only determined the age of the early Flores tools, but also stated unambiguously that they proved the presence of *H. erectus*, is simply ignored. Webb's suggestion that Wallacean sea crossings were hampered because 'people could not see their destination' (p.96) indicates that he has not been to the area, because from Java to Timor, the destination shore was clearly and easily visible prior to each of the several crossings, at any sea level. His extensive discussion of maritime travel, of watercraft size and construction, supplies and required technology, so central to the subject of his book, is not based on my fifteen or so academic publications on the subject (including a major book), but on pure speculation of a subject with which he is unfamiliar. Similarly, he fails to take into account the effects of plate tectonics subduction and plate elasticity, the strengths of transverse sea currents and similar factors in estimating distances to be crossed. All the variables determining the difficulties of sea crossings undertaken in the Pleistocene have been examined in some detail, and Webb's naive scenarios were entirely avoidable.

The strength of the second part of this book is perhaps attributable to its author's specialisation in the palaeopathology of Australian Indigenous. It is very worthwhile, but the book's first half deserves sceptical reading. Webb should have resisted the temptation to venture into subject areas that have been covered in literature he is not familiar with. Perhaps he sought to comply with publisher's advice to set his discussion in a colonisation context, and certainly the publisher does bear responsibility for the book's weaknesses.

#### REFERENCE

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#### **Lamalama Country: Our country, our culture-way**

Paddy Bassani and Albert Lakefield with Tom Popp 2006

Edited by Bruce Rigsby and Noelene Cole  
Akito in association with Arts Queensland, Brisbane,  
x+70pp, ISBN 0 646 45686 5

*Review by Mark Crocombe, Kanamkek-Yile Ngala Museum, and Cultural Coordinator, Thamarrurr Rangers, Wadeye, with Graeme K Ward, AIATSIS*

*Lamalama Country* provides the reader with a good insight into Indigenous Australian appreciation and management of country and resources. The perspective is that of two senior men who were grown up in that country. They list and picture a variety of plants and animals and tell the reader a little about their environmental and cultural significances. Their Indigenous voice is to the fore. Their account is set in context by a useful Preface and Introduction provided by the editors. It talks of groups removed from their traditional lands under the Queensland legislation and their enduring desire to return to look after the Country of their ancestors, to re-establish their knowledges of that Country and to pass it on to younger generations who need to know their 'cultural roots'.

Paddy Bassani and Albert Lakefield — senior Lamalama men — and their relative, Tommy George, visited the Cape York Peninsula Lakefield

National Park in 1996 with their friend Tom Popp (ATSIC's Cairns regional manager) to whom they related stories about their country, which includes part of the Park and the coast and waters of Princess Charlotte Bay. They recorded stories about its fauna and flora and how they managed its resources to conserve them as well as to provide a livelihood for themselves and their families, about the laws and customs passed down from their ancestors and which provide the basis of their traditional ownership of this country. After Tom Popp died, Cliff Little, then Rigsby and Cole — social anthropologist and rock-art specialist respectively, and both familiar with the region and its peoples — were given the MS and Popp's photographs. They have done an excellent job in bringing out Lamalama perspectives on the country and setting the story in its natural- and cultural-historical contexts.

The account begins with brief biographies of the main characters and editors. An introduction backgrounds the area in geographical and historical terms (there are some excellent photographs here and elsewhere — the presentation of which is enhanced by the large (A4) format of the book); then there are accounts of European exploring parties, followed by a brief account of the post-WWI history. Occupation of the region by pastoralists resulted in formation of a Lamalama settlement at Port Stewart, then the removal of traditional owners and the destruction of their settlements. Of Port Stewart in 1961: 'Their houses were burnt down and their dogs were shot' (p.6). Those resettled at Bamaga retained their desire to return to the Port Stewart area, and when they had the resources to do so, they visited and resided during the dry season, and initiated claims for legal tenure, which were largely accomplished thirty years later. Claims for ownership of the Park under the *Aboriginal Land Act 1991 (Qld)* produced much evidence of traditional affiliation but resulted in no transfer despite a recommendation to that effect. Today most Lamalama reside at Coen during the wet and the school year but occupy and use their homelands during weekends and holidays.

The main body of the book comprises accounts of Country by Paddy and Albert: the Lamalama were known as 'The Dugong Hunters of Cape York' (p.9); they spoke of increase ceremonies, a