Warning: the following presentation contains names and images of Aboriginal peoples now deceased.

Domesticity on the frontier: An investigation of daily life at a Queensland Native Mounted Police Camp

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Nathan Police Camp, officers’ quarters, Lower Herbert (Cairns Historical Society, Neg. P12/P1979)

Introduction

- Australian archaeological research - pastoral industry, missions, early settlements and frontier violence in the form of potential massacre sites
- Some similarities in the experiences of Aboriginal troopers and Aboriginal women residing at NMP camps, with those of Aboriginal people who were interred in institutions elsewhere.
- Comparisons for the study - archaeological excavations at Boralga and historical evidence relating to Native Police life in the form of photographs, maps and archival records

Boralga

- The Boralga Native Police Camp is located on the floodplain of the Laura River within the Lakefield National Park, 140 km south-west of Cooktown.
- Early maps drawn by sub-inspector Stanhope O’Connor in 1877 show the Police Reserve on the Laura River to cover an area of 238.5 acres (96.5 hectares).
- Abundant material remains, with the majority of artefacts associated with building remnants and features

The domestic space

- The negotiation of shared domestic space - isolation, adjusting to domestic life, power inequalities, economic disparities and the maintenance of cultural identities
- Pressure to conform was comparable to mission objectives - co-opting Aboriginal people into European agendas regarding NMP recruitment tactics
The domestic space

- The intent of the NMP was military—the system of organisation was primarily directed at single men amongst whom discipline had to be enforced.
- This included wearing and upkeeping uniforms, and living in a very European-ordered and regulated spatial setting.

Native Police at Lower Laura, 1890
(Queensland State Library, Neg. 66439)

Native Mounted Police at Lower Laura Camp, 1890’s
(Cairns Historical Society Neg. PM104273)

The domestic space

- Aboriginal women dressed in their ‘best’ show that European discipline extended to them as well.
- Historic photographs show Aboriginal women and children living in what appears to be a serene domestic setting at the Boralga NMP camp.
- It is not known exactly how they came to be there or what their role was.

Native Police troopers and their wives outside their bark huts at Boralga NMP camp, 1881
(Qld Police Museum, Neg. PM3691)

The domestic space

- Aboriginal troopers involved in more stable relationships were occasionally allowed to have their partners reside with them at police camps.

1898-99 ration cash book for the Cooktown NMP listing Aboriginal troopers, women and children residing at the camp

Black Tracker Carning and his wife at Boulia, 1902
(Qld Police Museum, Neg. PM0121)

The domestic space

- Roth virtually accuses the NMP of captivity stating that:

Roth, WE, 1903, Letter to the Under Secretary Home Department
05/02/1903 (Queensland State Archives, ID87382)

Mary at Laura with Policeman Daniel Frith with his children, Constance and Ned
(Queensland State Library, Neg. 151978)

The domestic space

- The contribution of these women to the successful running of NMP camps was undeniable, as expressed in a letter written in 1866 by an officer stationed at the Norman River NMP camp.

Roth, WE, 1903, Letter to the Under Secretary Home Department
05/02/1903 (Queensland State Archives, ID87382)

Letter from Walter E. Roth, Northern Protector of Aborigines, to the Under Secretary from the Home Department in 1903 discussing the distribution of food rations:

Gins of native troopers have never been taken into account in the recruitment or engagement under police regulation any more than the wives of any white man recruited for general police. Aboriginals when recruited are generally single, and cannot at any time be said to be ‘married’. They annex and discard gins at pleasure and no sort of police control over the women has ever been authorised.
The domestic space

• Issues demonstrated in the correspondence between the Police Commissioner, David Thompson Seymour, Walter E Roth and the Under Secretary in 1902-03, when discussing ration cut-backs for Aboriginal women within NMP camps

• The absolvance of responsibility for Aboriginal women is indicative of attitudes as late as 1903

Roth, WE, 1902-1903, letter to the Under Secretary Home Department 04/11/1902-22/01/1903, (Queensland State Archives ID87382)

The archival information has prompted the faunal analysis carried out on bone recovered from the troopers’ huts area at trench 7

• By identifying the principal taxa, this analysis explores the prospect of insufficient food rationing and self-provisioning at Boralga

Mary/surro girl who came with the Fitzgibbons, Rosy and Mr Kennedy, possibly an inspector at Laura in the 1890s (Queensland State Archives, Neg. 110175)

Methods

• Geophysics, including ground-penetrating radar and magnetometry were used

• A metal detector was also used to locate metal items and establish patterns in the discard of material culture beneath the surface

• Twenty trenches were identified and excavated by hand, using the single context system

GPR behind officer’s house Photograph (Bateman 2016)

Les Harrigan and Rinyurru rangers Photograph (Bateman 2016)

Trench 7, or the troopers’ huts area

• Trench 7 was identified from photographs, surface material, geophysics and metal detector information.

Native Police troopers and their wives outside their bark huts at Boralga NMP camp, 1881 (Qld Police Museum, Neg. PM3691)

Trench 7, trooper’s hut area at Boralga Photograph (Bateman 2016)

A wide variety of artefacts was recovered from trench 7, including:

• 454 g of knapped glass

• Knapped stone

• Clay pipe stems and bowls

• Various militaria such as a musket ball

• 4 brass foil cartridge cases with base discs still attached from Martini Henry or Snider rifle cartridge cases

• 3 lead projectiles

• 5 percussion cartridge cases

• 2 small pinfire cartridges

• 2 larger pinfire cartridge cases

• Melted lead

• Military snake clasp belt buckle

• and 4 military buttons with the VR cipher

Two post holes were uncovered as well as a campfire or cooking area as demonstrated by the variety of burnt bone and associated charcoal.

The soil, which was mostly compacted sandy loam, was sieved through 4 mm gauge mesh.

Artifact deposits recovered from within and immediately surrounding the troopers’ huts area were less than 30 cm deep.

The majority of bone came from squares 3 and 5

Charcoal sample from trench 7, square 5

Trench 7, square 5, trench wall showing cut and fill post holes and artefact deposits. Photograph (Bateman 2016)

Trench 7, square 5, trench wall showing cut and fill post holes and artefact deposits. Photograph (Bateman 2016)
Table 1: Summary of faunal weights for trench 7 in grams - Total bone weight = 824 grams

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class or Taxon</th>
<th>% of Tot. Wt. bone identified</th>
<th>% of Tot. Wt. bone diagnostic</th>
<th>% of Tot. Wt. bone domestic</th>
<th>% of Tot. Wt. bone native</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mammal</td>
<td>64.7</td>
<td>66.8</td>
<td>71.3</td>
<td>58.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fish</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reptile</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bird</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invertebrate</td>
<td>5.3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Results

- The total weight of bone removed from trench 7 was 824 g.
- Of the bone removed, 74% (just over 90%) was not well preserved as it was burnt or calcined, or small and fragmented.
- Around 50% of the bone was non-diagnostic.
- Four small pieces of bone appeared to be cut through rather than broken.
- Only 22% of the bone could be identified to a class level, and most of this (77%) was domestic bone.
- The bird and fish would most likely have been native, making up around 50% of the overall assemblage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example of bone possibly cut</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More domestic bone - suitable to positively separate into domestic or native categories</td>
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</table>

Interpretation

- The faunal assemblage demonstrates that a portion of their diet consisted of traditional foods hunted and gathered for their own consumption.
- Although agency and the decision to maintain cultural practices should be considered, the evidence supports the archival record which indicates that the Aboriginal troopers and women were self-provisioning possibly in order to survive within the Brisbane NHP camp.

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