

## **Regional Variation in the Material Culture of Hunter-Gatherers.** *Social and Ecological Approaches to Ethnographic Objects from Queensland, Australia* **Anne Best**

Oxford: British Archaeological Reports International Series 1149, 2003, Pp. 188, paperback.  
ISBN 1-84171-519-0

### **Review by Simon Holdaway**

*Department of Anthropology, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand, [sj.holdaway@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:sj.holdaway@auckland.ac.nz)*

This book presents a revised version of a 2000 Ph.D. thesis and sets out to determine whether artifacts of various types, removed from the temporal and spatial contexts in which they were manufactured by placement in museum collections, can still be used to isolate stylistic differences at a regional level among groups of recent hunter-gatherers. The case study deals with a range of artifacts manufactured by Indigenous Australians in Queensland, Australia, that now reside in museums in both Australia and the UK. Through establishing the spatial dimensions of artifact differentiation at a regional level, it is argued that the presence of social boundaries can be assessed, and the social continuities and discontinuities that characterize these boundaries can be determined.

Best's book is divided into three parts that incorporate seven chapters. Part I provides the background to the study with separate chapters on aims, the theoretical literature on region and style, the literature relevant to hunter-gatherers, and the Australian state of Queensland.

Six artifact types are considered: bags/baskets, boomerangs, message sticks, shields, spears, and spear throwers, and all were collected during the period between 1846 and 1914. The period is important because Best is concerned with considering artifacts manufactured before Indigenous Australian peoples were concentrated onto missions and established social orders disrupted. By investigating the distribution of artifacts in each of the six classes in relation to the social context of their use and the ecology of their location, a model is proposed that assesses style, ecology, and society in a way applicable to the archaeological record.

As Paleolithic archaeologists will be aware, style has been, and continuous to be, a contentious issue among those interested in material culture. The major theories are the subject of a review in Chapter 2, but, from the beginning, Best makes clear that, for her study, stylistic expression encompasses the full range of variation that distinguishes an artifact of one type from another. One of the research questions asked concerns the determination of whether technology, subsistence, resource availability, exchange, or the transmission of social information is at the heart of stylistic variability.

The link between region and style is founded on Kroeber's work in North America, and ecological models have received much attention in Australia. Best cites Peterson, for instance, who along with others has used drainage basins as a way to divide up Indigenous Australian populations. The presence of boundaries between hunter-gatherer groups relates in turn to ideas concerning open and closed systems. In harsh environments (e.g., the semi-arid zone of Australia) style serves to bind together populations that are spread across large areas. These 'open systems' contrast with the 'closed systems' present in richer environments. Here, style boundaries are present between more closely packed, and potentially competing, populations. Best argues that following Lee's definitions, both open and closed systems are extremes and no system in Australia was truly closed. However, the terms allow her to consider the nature of social boundaries among hunter-gatherers in their social and environmental settings.

Chapter 3 reviews theories of hunter-gatherers and the social units that exist within a region. Australian anthropologists have long recognized a relationship between territory size, population, and the environment. In all parts of Australia, Indigenous people coalesce during certain times of the year and disperse at others. Band composition and size is thus linked to the environment and through the work of Stanner and others, the environment is in turn linked to land use and ownership.

The final chapter in Part I of the book is used to review the geography of Queensland focusing on drainage divisions, as well as regional environments, and relating these to regional technologies, subsistence strategies, social status, language groups, kinship patterns, and initiation ceremonies. Regional ethnography is reviewed, as is Queensland archaeology and rock art studies.

Part II of the book introduces the material culture study itself, beginning in Chapter 5 with the background to the methods employed and the description of the six categories of material culture to be considered. The categories were selected for a number of reasons, including their representation in museum collections, their relationship to different sections of society, their use in a number of social contexts, and the range of production methods and raw materials used. Data collection involves obtaining information on a standardized set of variables, including major categories of design elements. These are then further divided into design groups and types. The object categories are described with reference to materials, manufacturing techniques, and social contexts.

Chapter 6 presents the data analysis and is by far the longest chapter in the book. A hierarchical approach is followed, beginning with a broad consideration of the composition of each artifact category. Each is investigated using morphological variables such as color, material, manufacturing techniques, and decorations. At each stage, the results are examined in relation to the regions discussed in Part I. This is followed by a consideration of the rock art evidence, searching for regional differences in artifact depictions. Stylistic patterns are identified where attributes show gaps in the geographic distribution at a regional level. Results are presented as correlations between region and stylistic traits. Etched, painted, and hooked boomerangs, for instance, are restricted to the East Coast, Rainforest, and Eyre regions, respectively. Similarly, shields show distinct regional differences when analyzed according to decorative techniques, motifs, and colors. Spears are found in the tropical north, but decrease markedly in frequency in the southern regions.

Part III of the book has a single discussion chapter where the spatial patterning evident in the stylistic analysis of the six artifact categories is evaluated against the social and ecological based hunter-gatherer models discussed in Chapter 2. A comparison is made between the results from the Queensland study and Clark's archaeological study of Scandinavia. As predicted, Best finds that geographic regions are less distinctively bounded by Clark's utilitarian stone artifact types when compared to her Queensland artifacts. Nevertheless, Best argues that less utilitarian forms in Scandinavia, such as bone points, may show distribution patterns more consistent with the Australian artifact categories.

The Queensland artifacts show that both social and environmental factors affect style and that it is difficult to separate the relative contribution of these two variables. Clearly, broad scale environmental differences to some degree determine the distribution of objects; in the arid zone where group mobility is high, raw material is conserved and the number of items that can be easily carried is limited. Where mobility is reduced, objects are designed to fulfill specific tasks and transportability is less of an issue. Despite this, however, and contrary to those in Australia who stress the distinction between open and closed societies, style traits in the resource rich areas of Queensland show broad stylistic continuities. The extensive homogeneity of material from the semi-arid zones, Best argues, reflects the larger spatial scale of the drainage systems in these zones. Controlling for environmental differences, Best sees a common number of tribal or population entities associated with a particular style group in both the more marginal and richer geographic regions. This allows her to conclude that the spatial extent of a style tradition is limited to only a certain number of population units. Individual artifacts are in some ways similar to Russian Dolls. Just as larger versions of the toy doll hide smaller examples, so artifact types provide progressively more information to a series of smaller and more constrained population units as more specific trait sets are 'read' from particular artifacts. Therefore, within the geographic region represented by a particular style category, there is considerable flexibility in the level of information content that may be transmitted.

In concluding, Best suggests that the archaeological application of the method outlined in her study might be most effective when combined with a multidisciplinary survey strategy that investigates excavated (presumably utilitarian) artifacts, site distribution patterns, and rock art. The Queensland study allows the prediction that when population entity numbers exceed 6-13 tribal units, a change should occur in the style of artifact categories.

Given the level of debate concerning style in archaeology, Best provides a remarkably convincing case for the existence of stylistic regional divisions when nonutilitarian artifacts are considered from a limited time period. The interrelationship between environment and social explanations is clearly demonstrated at a regional scale. Thus, within the limits of the study, the goals that are set are clearly fulfilled. This said, there remain a number of interesting questions that need to be considered when applying the study design to archaeological examples. In the Queensland example, space is investigated by holding time constant; the dates over which the artifact categories were collected, and therefore probably manufactured, are deliberately constrained. Archaeological chronologies are rarely so precise, and archaeologists must deal with changing form as well as spatial boundaries. To some degree, Best can claim that by considering the rock art evidence, stylistic analysis can be given time depth. While true, the difficulty comes in understanding the significance of change when faced with it. In Australia, there is a tendency to see a great deal of continuity paralleling the ethnographic situation back in time until, at some point in the past, the ethnographic situation no longer seems to apply. The result is a rather punctuated long term Indigenous Australian history. At the same time, the environmental history of Australia is seen as one of marked change over relatively short time periods. Over time it may well be that stylistic boundaries existed, but it is also likely that the nature of these boundaries changed, perhaps at a temporal scale that is sometimes difficult for archaeologists to observe. Thus, in Australia, recognizing stylistic boundaries has not always proven so easy.

Archaeologists also tend to deal with sites and assemblages. Spatial analyses rarely extend to an entire state. Therefore, archaeologists must understand the nature of stylistic divisions at the sub-regional scale. Best provides some guidance here discussing the existence of sub-regions in the semi-arid zone, as have others (Sampson's (1988) study is a surprising omission from Best's bibliography), but archaeologists clearly face a challenge, particularly when the bulk of the archaeological record consists of utilitarian artifacts.

These criticisms in no way undermine the value of Best's book because they are directed at how the approach might be extended beyond the goals of the book. *Regional Variation In The Material Culture Of Hunter Gatherers* is an excellent study, well worth a read, and provides much for archaeologists interested in style, region, and society to ponder.

#### **Reference**

Sampson, Garth (1988). *Stylistic Boundaries Among Mobile Hunter-Gatherers*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.