

Is it from the Dreaming, or is it Rubbish?: The Significance and Meaning of Stone Artefacts and their Sources to Aboriginal People in the Pilbara Region of Western Australia.

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The Dreaming, when the Ancestral Beings created form and brought natural/social order to a featureless empty world, is central to the worldview of the Aborigines of North-western Australia. The natural world, including the stone in it and the activities of animals and humankind, is constantly interpreted through the lens of the Dreaming. Myth explains the origin of different types of stone, and artefacts manufactured from different sources may have mythological/ritual or more mundane significance. Though Aboriginal people now use Western tools, stone blades are still regularly manufactured for male initiation rites. Development of the Pilbara region, a major mining province, has resulted in numerous archaeological surveys as part of heritage assessment processes associated with project approvals. Aboriginal people are routinely asked to comment on the significance of artefact scatters, reduction areas and quarries, among other archaeological features, some of which are interpreted as being of mythological/ritual significance and imbued with spiritual power. Others are seen as being of little or no significance, even rubbish. However, all are considered to have been manufactured by the 'Old People' from whom they are directly descended, and belong on the country in which they have been found. Observations suggest that changes have occurred in recent years in the significance and meaning attributed to archaeological objects and features in response to development and continuing archaeological research. This paper draws on ongoing research with Aboriginal people in the Pilbara, and examines how meaning and significance is attributed to stone artefact assemblages and their sources. We highlight the emergence of shared 'communities of practice' between archaeologists and Aboriginal people and how this process influences their engagement with stone. We note, for example, that terms that were once the jargon of professional archaeologists are now an integral part of Aboriginal vocabularies relating to their heritage and its assessment.