Exchanging Totems: Totemism in Baldwin Spencer's Overseas Exchanges

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Abstract: Between 1899 and 1908, the director of the National Museum of Victoria, Walter Baldwin Spencer dispatched, as either gifts or exchanges, multiple collections of Aboriginal objects to museums in Europe and North America. He initially used these collections to promote his and Francis Gillen's ideas and research into totemism. Totemism was one of the hot debates of early twentieth century sociology/anthropology, and the collections constructed by Spencer and Gillen were representative of illustrations published in their books. In building his collections, Spencer developed a hierarchy of totemic symbols and 'manufactured' the nurtunja (Anartentye) as an Arunta (Arrernte) equivalent of the American North-West Coast totem pole. In placing importance on the nurtunja, Spencer used material culture to develop and promote facets of social theory. This paper reflects on how material culture influenced aspects of Spencer's own 'social theory' and, in turn, how social theory was used to shape 'trade' in material culture among museums. In doing so, the paper also examines how Spencer's ideas on totemism changed over time.

Walter Baldwin Spencer and Francis James Gillen's Native Tribes of Central Australia (1899) is a landmark text in the history of anthropology. Howard Morphy (1997: 41) argues that Spencer and Gillen pioneered modern practices in anthropological fieldwork; however they are dismissed by others as historical evolutionists who sought to collect "information that would support the opinions of leading men" in Britain (Urry 1993: 45). This relegation is partly of their own making. In 1902, Spencer and Gillen saw their own importance in terms of salvaging Aboriginal culture and providing data that was relatively untheoretical to answer debates on totemism (Morphy 1997: 28-30). Totemism was a foundation theme in Victorian anthropological theory. It held the promise of understanding the natural condition of humans, the origins of the family, the origin of religion, the emergence of property, the development of society and the transition from savagery to civilization (Kuper 1988). As part of this debate, Spencer and Gillen interpreted objects as examples of totemism and used discussions on totemism as a basis for presenting and exchanging collections internationally.

This paper explores these inter-museum exchanges in two ways. First, it looks at how Spencer used the idea of totemism to stake his and Gillen's claim in the emerging discipline of anthropology. Second, it argues that Spencer's ideas on totemism changed over time; this is partly because of the exchanges he made using material culture. The consequence of Spencer changing his ideas over time was that Spencer, rather than acting as a rubber stamp for social evolution, began to reject global theories of totemism and even downplayed his use of totemism as a value in later exchanges. His final position was one of heavily qualified support for global theories on social evolution, whilst personally pursuing an Australian focus in his theorising.

A key aspect of Victorian-era museums was the practice of specimen exchange (Bennett 2004: 33-35; Gosden, Larson et al. 2007: 61; Endersby 2008). Between 1901 and 1908, Spencer sent approximately 700 ethnographic objects to European and American institutions. Most of these objects were dispatched by Spencer in the 1902 collections as donations, which consisted of surplus objects from Spencer and Gillen's 1901 expedition across Australia. Spencer also made two substantial exchanges in 1908 to the Chicago Field Museum and the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, St Petersburg. The use of exchanges in promoting a theoretical viewpoint speaks of Spencer and Gillen's place in the global anthropological community. Since
the 1932 publication of Spencer’s letters to James Frazer, Spencer and Gillen have been the subject of discussions around the centre and periphery in Anthropological thought and intellectual thought more broadly (see Marett & Penniman 1932; Mulvaney and Calaby 1985; Kuper 1988; Urry 1993; Morphy 1997; Kublick 2006). They also saw the examination of material culture as being as important as field research, a point that is often not acknowledged (Mulvaney 2008: 144). For Spencer and Gillen, exchanges of material culture were another form of promoting their research and contributed to establishing their scholarly standing. In using totemism as a point in the exchange, Spencer and the recipients of his objects were keenly involved in discussions on the nature and extent of totemism and such discourse was part of Spencer’s debates with the broader Western scholarly community. Spencer’s exchanges demonstrate the use of material culture in constructing theoretical notions of totemism and Spencer’s significant place in that community. Nevertheless, Spencer was also reflective in this process, and changed his position over time. By 1908 his exchanges of objects were concerned with establishing museological status rather than analogies to totemism.

Building a Network

Spencer’s belief in the importance of presenting material culture collections to international institutions originated in his experience as a zoologist. Physical collections were central to the practice of nineteenth century biology, a tradition that Spencer brought with him to anthropology. Spencer was not alone in this endeavour. In the 1880s and 1890s museums had been major patrons of anthropology; however, by 1900 the museological approach to anthropology was already becoming somewhat passé (Kublick 1991: 46-54; Urry 1993: 107-9). By the end of Spencer’s career in 1928, museums had lost their central place in anthropology, as universities became places of a more academic anthropology. As a zoologist, Spencer came from a tradition of collecting and describing specimens. A key aspect of this tradition was the need to study physical specimens of the species. This created a global trade in specimens for study and research (Brandon-Jones 1997; Rudwick 2005: 37-41; Endersby 2008). Spencer’s first real foray into ethnology anthropology was the Horn Expedition of 1894, on which he served as zoologist. On his return from the Horn Expedition, Spencer sent zoological collections to leading institutions and individuals throughout Europe. By comparison, after his return from his 1896-7 ethnographic expedition, Spencer dispatched relatively few objects. One reason for this is practical. Although a professor of biology at the University of Melbourne and a member of the Board of Trustees for the Public Library, Museums and National Gallery of Victoria, he had no day-to-day involvement in the museum in 1897. Consequently, he was not entitled to free government postage under museum auspices and therefore had to personally pay to post any collections that related to his first book. At this point, without an appropriate institutional letterhead or affiliation, he and Gillen were amateurs engaging in ethnology in their spare time.

Spencer’s most fruitful connections in the global anthropological community came through Lorimer Fison, who lived in Moonee Ponds on the outskirts of Melbourne. Fison was Spencer’s first real teacher in anthropological/ethnographic methodology, and influenced Spencer to focus on social organization as a means of gaining data for social evolutionary speculation (Mulvaney and Calaby 1985; Jones 2005). Fison, a former missionary, was a follower of the American social evolutionist Lewis Henry Morgan. Working with Alfred Howitt, Fison wrote Kainilaroi and Kurnai in 1880, using Morgan’s social theory of kinship. Fison had also built up a corresponding friendship with Edward Tylor and James Frazer. In 1897, Fison sent Frazer some details of Spencer and Gillen’s research, thereby introducing Spencer to Frazer (Morphy 1997: 25; XM 1179). Consequently, prior to writing Native Tribes of Central Australia, Spencer and Gillen had few connections in the anthropological community. In turn, Spencer’s surviving letters indicate he sent out only a few complimentary copies of Native Tribes to European anthropologists. At this early stage, Spencer was an anthropological blow-in.

Totemism was a key debate in late nineteenth century anthropology. The early social evolutionary theorists John McLennan, Edward Tylor, Lewis Morgan, Robertson Smith, James Frazer and Andrew Lang were all engrossed in the idea of totemism (Kuper 1983). The totem and its subsequent ‘ism’ in Western social thought first emerged from the observations of culturally aware eighteenth and nineteenth century travellers, particularly in North America. These travellers noted the customs of peoples they encountered and observed. They found North American indigenous peoples placed importance on plants and animals, and noted how these indigenous peoples adopted aspects of these plants and animals as personal characteristics in people — thereby making social and religious links between the human and natural world. On a very broad level, this was totemism — the identification of a particular animal as being associated with the founding of a group (tribe or clan). In 1840, the naturalist George Grey observed a similar phenomenon in Australia and made a comparative global connection (Jones 2005: 14-15). He also looked for similarities in the biblical tradition, and in doing so, Grey made a stadial connection by linking the ethnological present to the antiquarian past (Stocking 1987: 83). Grey’s observations created the basis for a global comparative approach to totemism.

For its theoretical protagonists, totemism held boundless promise with Frazer postulating “in this rude scheme of society” we can garner “the germs out of which not only
all religion but all material progress have been evolved in the course of ages” (Frazer 1910: 91). Therefore, the secret of the totem was the key to the development of social institutions, and as such, totemism became a central plank of social evolutionary theory.

Problematically however, evidence for totemism had not been adopted until the 1880s, rested on ambiguous accounts. Later in the 1880s and 1890s, detailed ethnographic accounts came from America, the Pacific and Australia. In the case of Australia, as Hoffman Hay (1958: 121) argues, Fison and Howitt, and later Spencer and Gillen provided “the first unbiased, closely observed, general treatises on a particular culture made by men with a scientific point of view”. Although “unbiased” accounts were emerging, there was an overall trend of ambiguity in late nineteenth century totemism debates, where according to Kuklick (2006: 346), rival theorists had not adopted “shared definitions of the terms ‘totem’ and ‘totemism’ as well as of practices that might be associated with totemism, such as ‘witchcraft’, ‘magic’, and ‘fetishism’”. Therefore, Spencer and Gillen were not just providing grist to the metropolitan theorists’ mill, but were also entering what Kuklick (2006: 545) has termed a scholarly “theatre of war”.

Spencer certainly felt uncomfortable in this “theatre of war”. On a number of occasions in his letters to Frazer, Spencer indicated that he felt he was unqualified to make theoretical pronouncements and complained that he didn’t have the “energy” to “correct” the misinterpretations made by others (6/7/1903 XM1125). His first foray into theory was his and Gillen’s paper on Totemism read at the Anthropological Institute on 11th of December 1898, although, as he expressed to Frazer, Spencer was cautious in allowing this to be published (25/1/1899 XM1111; Spencer & Gillen 1899). After the public reading at the Institute, Tylor, with condescending praise “congratulated Spencer on the success with which he had carried his zoological training into the path of Anthropology” (Spencer and Gillen 1899: 280). Although they were accepted, Spencer knew he and Gillen were on the outside. Spencer’s reluctance needs to be placed in the context of his career change: from amateur to zoologist to anthropologist. Spencer had few anthropological contacts and repeatedly commented to Frazer and Balfour that he felt unqualified to theorise, by which he meant that he was unqualified to comment on global totemism. In the 1890s he was regularly corresponding with metropolitan thinkers in matters of biology; however prior to writing Native Tribes his correspondence with thinkers outside his Oxford circle were few. Even Tylor, who Spencer had worked with at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, had very little corresponding influence on Spencer (Morphy 1997: 27).

Psychologically, Spencer felt unqualified and not connected enough to engage as a metropolitan thinker. His exchanges and gifts were one means of addressing this deficiency.

Spencer and Gillen’s 1902 Gifts

On returning from his 1902 expedition to Northern Australia, Baldwin Spencer was eager to disseminate the results of his and Gillen’s fieldwork. Within 18 months he had written and published the results of their fieldwork. James Frazer approvingly commented that Spencer could “reel off” publications to European audiences (6/7/1903: XM1125). Publication however, was only one means of Spencer and Gillen disseminating their results. In December 1902 Spencer built six collections as gifts for museums and prominent individuals. These collections were roughly equal in size, with each collection having to fit into two shipping cases. The collections were all examples of the material culture he and Gillen identified in Native Tribes of Northern Australia. It was the perfect way to promote his and Gillen’s book, and more broadly their ideas on totemism.

It is a commonly held belief that, in order to create a global ethnographic collection, Spencer exchanged “Australian ethnographic items with other museums throughout the world” (Petch Forthcoming; see also Mulvaney and Calaby 1985: 249-52; Mulvaney 2008). Although he sent collections overseas, Spencer was generally critical of the practice. Prior to becoming the Director of the National Museum of Victoria, Spencer had outlined his misgivings about exchanging objects to Henry Balfour in 1898, stating “You have probably a better lot of Australian things there than we have out here which is not saying very much for you I am sorry to say and now our chance has passed by” (28/12/1898 p.7, XM1200). The curator of the Chicago Field Museum reported that Spencer had “refused many offers of exchange” because of “the extreme rarity of” Australian artefacts (Dorsey 23/6/1909). In 1913, Spencer played a leading role in creating restrictions on the export of cultural material and often complained that German missionaries were exporting Aboriginal material culture (Pescott and Grimwade 1954: 108-109). His general misgivings about the export of material culture indicate that the 1902 collections are special and deserving of scrutiny.

Spencer forwarded collections to Franz Boas at the American Museum of Natural History, the British Museum; Owen College, Manchester; Professor Giglioli at the Zoological Museum, Florence; and the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. Out of the six collections Spencer dispatched in 1902, three were to British institutions which reflects Spencer’s pre-existing networks and his and Gillen’s desire for influence. The collections sent to Owen College and the Pitt Rivers Museum emanate from his close personal history with these institutions. Spencer had initially enrolled at Owen College as an art student, but later transferred to medicine. From there he learnt zoology, botany and geology, but then moved to Exeter College, Oxford to focus on zoology. At Oxford, he studied under Henry Moseley with fellow
students Henry Balfour (the future director of the Pitt Rivers Museum) and Walter E Roth (a pioneering ethnologist in Queensland). Later, at Oxford, he worked with Moseley and Edward Tylor rehousing General Pitt Rivers' collection from London to its new home in the Oxford Museum (Mulvaney and Calaby 1985: 60). Owen College therefore was Spencer's introduction to higher learning and scientific rationality, whilst the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford was his introduction to anthropology.

Spencer’s selection of recipients was deliberate and designed to maximise the impact of Native Tribes in Northern Australia. Although Spencer sent the gifts, Gillen was an equal in the use of material culture to promote their research. As well as being the Alice Springs post and telegraph stationmaster, Gillen was the special magistrate and Aboriginal sub-protector in Alice Springs. This meant Gillen had a working relationship that developed into a very close relationship with the Aboriginal community. He used this relationship to procure material culture and Aboriginal lore, which he used to promote himself in the scientific community. In 1896, Gillen presented a nurtunja (sacred pole) to the South Australian Museum, commenting in his diary that it was the “first specimen of its kind ever exhibited in a public institution” (Gillen and Libraries Board of South Australia 1968: 49). In identifying the object as the “pole under which the operation of sub incision is performed”, Gillen – in a conclusion that speaks more to his and Spencer’s peripheral position in the anthropological community. He remained a central force in British anthropology; his prudishness (Mulvaney and Calaby 1985: 178-9). Tylor was the keeper of the Pitt Rivers Museum and the first Professor of Anthropology at Oxford University. In 1901 he remained a central force in British anthropology; his inclusion suggests a degree of paying homage to the old sage. The final suggestion of America in Gillen’s list reflects the growing importance of America as a centre of intellectual thought, but also as the other centre of field research into totemism. Gillen’s assertion, that they would send a collection to the Anthropological Institute, in reality suggests how disconnected both Spencer and Gillen were. Although the Royal Anthropological Institute was the premier association for anthropology and ethnology in the British Empire, it had not possessed a museum since the 1880s.10

If the Pitt Rivers Museum was a personal yet strategic obligation, the British Museum was a national obligation. Gillen placed the British Museum first on his gift-list. In what was probably a subconscious acknowledgement of prestige associated with the British Museum, in compiling his gift lists, Spencer listed most recipients as “sent to”, however with the British Museum he listed the gift as “presented to”.11 Presenting collections to the British Museum was an important obligation for scientific collectors. Equally, such a collection advanced Spencer’s standing. We cannot underestimate the importance of layers of reciprocity in developing a scientific career. In addition, Spencer had not ruled out the idea of returning to Britain, and seriously considered it in 1898 (XM1200, 18/8/1898). These gifts were part of developing networks of patronage within the scientific community.12

Close examination of Spencer’s inventories demonstrate that he developed two different collection categories to be proffered as gifts: the first was a standard collection, and the second was a deluxe collection with the collection he sent in 1902. In general terms, the standard collection consisted of one magic object (a Tana); twenty-plus articles of clothing/ornament; fifteen-plus tools consisting of stone knives, spear throwers, adzes, women’s fighting clubs, shields and spears; and concluded with six churingas,13 four wooden and two stone. In addition, the collections also consisted of a ball of human hair string and totalled approximately 50 objects. The deluxe collection, as I term it, was the same as the first, but it also contained additional sacred and magic objects, in particular a nurtunja14. The quantities of duplicate objects were also greater, and the collections generally totalled 90 objects.15 Whilst still in the field, Spencer and Gillen jointly discussed the need for these collections and produced them with the aim of influencing opinions globally (Gillen and Libraries Board of South Australia, 1968: 49).

Spencer’s background in the natural sciences influenced the logical construction of these collections. Spencer built the collections as examples of “type specimens”, and as in biology, he provided meticulous descriptions of the objects’ material make-up/physiology (Mulvaney 2008: 153). Not only were the collections constructed as “types”, the objects were also listed in order of importance. The first objects listed were the ceremonial
or magic objects, the nurtunja and/or the tana, followed by clothing and ornaments. In Native Tribes Spencer argued that the Central Tribes did not use clothing for warmth, but instead to cover the sacred parts of the body and in some cases, the articles of clothing were also magical, such as the Knout or Jilika (Spencer and Gillen 2003 [1904]: 683-695). Bookending the list of clothing/ornaments was the Kardaitcha shoe, worn by sorcerer-assassins intent on delivering payback. The first 15-20 items on Spencer’s lists were cultural and had no utilitarian purpose; therefore, the first objects of Spencer’s gifts reflected his core research focus into ritual. The collections were ranked from the magical to the practical where Spencer listed tools and working objects. The last items on the lists were churinga, most of which were meant to be attached to the nurtunja, which were the first item on the lists. The collections therefore began with magic and concluded with totemic objects linked to magic. As collections for exhibition, they presented a circular holistic message that Central Australian culture revolved around the ceremony of totems.

### Totemism in the exchanges

The extent to which Spencer used illustrative collections to promote totemism is demonstrated by his decision to forward a collection to Franz Boas. As Director of the National Museum of Victoria in 1900, Spencer wrote to Boas asking for a “totem pole such as Dr Tylor has in the Oxford Museum”. Boas responded to Spencer, asking in return for a “representative collection of some one Australian tribe” (my italics). He also expressed his “great interest” and “appreciation of” Spencer’s “thorough work among the tribes of Central Australia”, particularly Spencer’s recording of “detailed information” on the “organization and customs of the tribes” (Boas to Spencer 28/9/1900 AMNH). Spencer responded, “I am most anxious to have something which is typical of ‘totemism in America’ and offer objects that were ‘typical of Australian totemic groups’” (Spencer to Boas 22/12/1902 AMNH).

Spencer’s and Boas’s responses to each other are indicative of two competing ideas in anthropological methodology. Boas appreciated Spencer for his fieldwork prowess. As one of his contemporaries observed, Boas “was especially appreciative of men who had achieved what he never attempted – an intimate, yet authentic, picture of aboriginal life” (Robert Lowie, cited in Kuper 1988: 134). As a curator at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, Boas rejected the social evolutionary approach to museum displays, instigating instead a policy of display by cultural grouping; hence he wrote to Spencer desiring a “representative collection” of one tribe (Boas to Spencer 28/9/1900 AMNH). Influenced by Darwin, Fison, Howitt, Tylor and Frazer, Spencer approached the exchange from a social evolutionary perspective and in turn, he wanted a collection representing totemism from Boas. With the Spencer and Boas exchange, we see two competing approaches to anthropological theory and museology, with both men using material culture to project competing ideological views.

Boas worked with Spencer’s request, promising to try to “arrange a collection illustrating totemism of the North West coast and send it to you” (Boas to Spencer 28/1/1903 AMNH). By discarding the social evolution approach, Boas would revolutionise anthropology, and, with his student Alexander Goldenweiser, critique the foundations of totemism as a social evolutionary stage (Jones 2005: 291-302). To Spencer in 1902 this was not clear because in the late 1880s Boas’ research supported the ideas of Tylor and Frazer (Kuper 1988: 135). By 1902 however, Boas was beginning to reject the validity of totemism. Nevertheless, he assembled a collection for Spencer that emphasised totemic symbols.

Boas assembled a collection from a number of North West Coast cultures, including that of the Tlingit, Haida, Bella Coola, Kwakiutl, and Nootka cultures. All of these were considered “totem cultures”, with each culture being divided into exogamous clans that derived their names from animals (Frazer 1910ii: 251-263). Carving adorned most of their objects, although some of the objects in the collection are very utilitarian in nature. Frazer (1910i: 260) argued that in North West cultures “the patterns” on their objects “regularly consist of representations of those animals, or of parts of those animals, which play a part in their mythical tales and tribal legends”. These animal representations were “crests”, which were also termed “personal totems” (Frazer 1910: iii). These crests appeared on houses, canoes, paddles, horn spoons, wooden spoons, masks, shamanistic rattles, trays and boxes (Swanton 1893: 122). The crests were distinct from clan groups, being personally accumulated and hereditary. The collection that Boas assembled for Spencer emphasised these crests and their construction and included shaman’s rattles and ceremonial masks of the totems. In particular, the collection included a slate carving of a totem pole as well as both horn and wooden spoons, which at the time were seen as “second only in interest to those on houses and poles” (Swanton 1893: 136). The spoons were like smaller versions of the totem poles, and told the same stories. Boas held out the possibility of acquiring a full-size totem pole, although he maintained the shipping costs were prohibitive and that he considered them a “modern development”. He offered to procure a house post, which is a smaller version of the totem pole, as an additional object. Spencer failed to engage in a longer dialogue with Boas and therefore the house post never arrived, possibly as a result of letters never arriving.17

The lack of an ongoing correspondence rules out any strong Boasian influence on Spencer and Gillen’s research. Nevertheless, there is an indication that Boas’ work did have an impact on Spencer. After receiving Boas’ collection in August 1903, Spencer (1904: 379)
delivered a paper on Totemism in Australia. In this paper, he effectively rejected global comparative approaches to totemism, stating, "any attempt to apply the terms 'totem' and 'totemism' to both Australian and American tribes, and then to explain Australian customs and beliefs by a reference to those of American tribes, cannot be other than misleading". Spencer's (1904: 378) rejection of comparisons between Australia and America was because the "personal totem" which is "frequently met with in America, is of very rare occurrence in Australia". In a letter to Frazer, he presented his argument even more clearly: "So far as I can see the Australian evidence is dead against the American theory" (4/2/1901 XM1126). Spencer even questioned the founder of global totemism, George Grey, commenting to Frazer "Grey really knew very little indeed about the customs of the natives" and that Grey is "so often quoted" that he became a universal reference for everything relating to totemism in Australia (15/1/1899 XM1111). Roth also influenced Spencer on the matter of totemism. Roth rejected totemism in Australia, leading to a number of heated correspondences between Roth and Spencer; although he did have an impact, as indicated by Spencer's letter to Balfour: "I have heard from Roth ... he tells me that as they [Aboriginal beliefs] ... didn't fit in with those amongst N.Am.[North American] Indians he came to the conclusion that they were not totems in the strict sense of the word" (28/1/1898 XM1200).

Importantly, Spencer also asked MacMillan (his publisher) to remove all footnotes comparing Australia to North America from Native Tribes of Central Australia (30/8/1898 XM1117). In his correspondence with Frazer, Spencer - as the careful area specialist - often appears frustrated with Frazer's - as the disconnected global theorist - global conjecturing and Frazer's comparisons between Australia, America and Africa.

Much of the material Boas sent Spencer consisted of objects adorned with crests or personal totems. Although Boas didn't send Spencer detailed notes on his interpretations, Spencer received notes through the museum's subscriptions to the Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History, the Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, and the Memoirs of the Field Museum of Chicago. Spencer was quick to complain if these publication exchanges did not arrive on time. Spencer was clearly reading American material, and developed his ideas considerably between 1898 and 1904 in response to American and Australian publications and correspondence.

This challenges aspects of the traditional view of Spencer as the ardent social evolutionist who supported Frazer. By 1904, Spencer not only rejected the comparisons with America but also questioned the idea that one could find a truly primitive tribe, and wrote to Frazer: "There is no such thing as an all round 'primitive' tribe" (Spencer 1904; 8/8/1903 XM1165). This proposition places Spencer and Gillen much closer to Boas' rejection of social evolution than has previously been recognised. Despite Spencer's practical closeness to Boas's approach, Spencer maintained his support for social evolution and Frazer's approach to totemism. Consequently, Spencer felt his work was not valued by Boas' circle in America.

**The nurtunja and totem poles**

The nurtunja was the prize specimen in the 1902 collections, and as far as Gillen (1968: 49) was concerned, enlightening people to the importance of the nurtunja was the prime reason for dispatching the collections overseas. Spencer promoted the nurtunja as the "most important" object to both Balfour and Boas. The importance of this object lay in the fact that it was associated with the Engwura initiation ceremony. In these ceremonies the nurtunja represent the various totems and symbolise the nurtunja of the Alcheringa spirits who were "reported to have carried about a sacred pole or nurtunja with them during their wanderings" (Spencer 1901: 51,138,284). The nurtunja was:

made from one to twenty spears; round these, first of all, long grass stalks are bound by means of the hair-girdles of the men, and then rings of down are added, and perhaps, not always, a few Churinga will be suspended at intervals. The top is almost always decorated with a large tuft of eagle-hawk feathers (Spencer and Gillen 2008 [1899]: 627).

Spencer saw the "the nurtunja with its churinga" as "typical of Australian totemic groups" (22/12/1902 AMNH). In his letters from 1902, Spencer placed more importance on the nurtunja than the churinga; a point that differs from his emphasis of the churinga in Native Tribes. It is also bizarre, for in Native Tribes Spencer presented the nurtunja as merely a vehicle for the ceremonial presentation of the churinga. The churinga, as Spencer (2008 [1899]:130) described them, "are one and all connected with the totems, and that the word signifies a sacred object, sacred because it is thus associated with the totems and may never be seen except upon very rare occasions". Spencer recognised that the churinga was a representation of the totem, not the totem itself, but in doing so, he was also trying to create a rigid typology between totem, churinga, and nurtunja. Churinga means sacred object, a point that he acknowledged, but chose to limit in his practical definition of churingas as "rounded, oval or elongated, flattened stones and slabs of wood of very various sizes" (Spencer and Gillen 2008 [1899]:128; Henderson and Dobson 1994: 332). Therefore, the emphasis placed on the nurtunja in 1902 had a particular purpose in relation to the transaction and needs to be contextualised.

In descriptive terms the nurtunja is a pole with the churinga (representations of totems) hanging from it.
Boas said it was waningas, Boas dispatched a 46 centimetre never arrived. By the was the reason why he contacted Boas, and although he didn't send Spencer the “original” totem pole.

Although the ideology of totemism connected the nurtunja and the totem pole, the visual aesthetic qualities were also compelling. Spencer saw the totem pole in the Pitt Rivers Museum as "impressive". This was a visual museological distinction and not an academic distinction on the nature of totemism. Like the North West Coast totem poles, Spencer saw the nurtunja as an aesthetic object, and commented to Balfour, “they are a revelation so far as one’s ideas of native Australian art are concerned" and boasted that “I have a case 8’x12’x8’ filled with ceremonial objects – nurtunjas, waningas, head dresses etc. which would make you envious” (6/1/1902 XM1200). This case did take pride of place in the museum and Spencer outlined it as a key display in the Guide to the Ethnographic Collection (1901). The ceremonial case was evocative, and the imagery associated with the ceremonial objects that Spencer popularised adorned tourist campaigns years afterwards and created a lasting impression of Central Australian culture (Russell 2001). Not only did the theory of totemism to link the nurtunja and totem pole, but in addition the grandiose-visual-nature of museums generally at the time made these analogies possible.

Spencer desired a North West Coast totem pole. This was the reason why he contacted Boas, and although Boas said it was “not impossible” to obtain a totem pole he didn’t send Spencer the “original” totem pole. Instead, Boas dispatched a 46 centimetre “Slate - model totem pole” and ordered “a house-post”. The latter however, never arrived. By the 1900s totem poles were becoming rare, hence Boas raised the possibility of commissioning one (Cole 1995). The manufacture of large totem poles was a major cultural shift in the North West Coast that was stimulated by the increased prosperity brought about by the eighteenth century fur trade and the introduction of metal tools, a point that Boas conveyed to Spencer (Barbeau 1944; Boas to Spencer 26/1/1903 AMNH).

As a visual object for display in the museum, the 46 centimetre model totem pole that Boas sent was not big enough for Spencer and he continued his search for a “genuine” totem pole. In 1908, the Field Museum dispatched their curator, George Dorsey, on a world collecting tour. The Museums' publicity touted the expedition as constituting “one of the most-comprehensive explorations ever attempted by any institution” (Anonymous 6/2/1908). Dorsey’s “expedition” was in reality a fact finding trip, which he used to determine the future collecting areas for the Field Museum (Nash and Feinman 2003: 57). After arriving in Broome, he soon gave up the idea of collecting in the field. From there he travelled to Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney, and visiting museums became his main focus (Dorsey to FJK Skiff 23/6/1909, MV Col. Doc. X17074).

Established from the leftovers from the Columbian Exposition of 1893, the Field Museum was a dynamic institution that saw collections as tradable commodities (Nash and Feinman 2003). Dorsey used museums in the same way a private collector would use a commercial gallery, openly asking Spencer about “the possibility of … securing some Australian material” in particular “some portion of the collections which he himself had made at very great expense in the heart of Australia, in exchange” (Dorsey to FJK Skiff 23/6/1909, MV Col. Doc. X17074). Spencer made it clear to Dorsey he had reservations about the export of Aboriginal material culture and that Australian material was extremely rare. He also categorically stated that he wanted a totem pole in return, although Dorsey appears to have been non-committal on that point (Dorsey to FJK Skiff 23/6/1909, MV Col. Doc. X17074).

Spencer lost no time in pursuing the deal, dispatching an “illustrative collection” of 251 objects on 15 October 1908 (MV Letter book 15/10/1908). The collection arrived in Chicago even before Dorsey returned. The collection was loaded with 88 predominantly Victorian stone tools, but also included a selection of ceremonial material illustrated in Spencer's books Native Tribes of Central Australia and Native Tribes of Northern Australia. Spencer emphasized the importance of this collection by virtue of his own celebrity status, exclaiming “all the central Australian things (with few exceptions) are from the collection made by Mr Gillen and myself and are genuine” (NMV Letter Book 15/10/1908). In reality, he gave the Field Museum only a few objects that he and Gillen had collected. As with Boas, Spencer dispatched 17 churinga complete with a "model of a nurtunja". Although Spencer was still exchanging...
“totemic” objects for another “totemic” object, he did not emphasise totemism in his correspondence, nor did he make the analogy between the nurtunja and the totem pole.

Spencer finally received his Haida totem pole in July 1911. He did not however use it in a display to portray comparative global totemism.27 By this time he would have been aware that North West Coast totem poles are technically not totem poles, but rather carved ceremonial columns that do include carvings of totemic species but not in a religious setting, and are erected by a family or a clan as a means of commemorating important events both historical and mythological (Garfield [1961], 1978; Malin 1986). More importantly, as commemorative objects, they are predominantly social rather than religious objects. By the time he received the Haida totem pole, Spencer had rejected the global analogy of totemism. Spencer argued that totemism in Australia was radically different from that of America. Consequently, he had also ceased comparing the nurtunja with the American totem poles. Given this, why did he still want a totem pole?

To answer this question, it is worth comparing the Haida totem pole exchange with exchange dialogue that occurred between Spencer and the St Petersburg Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (MAE) that also began in 1908. Similar to the other collections sent out, Spencer constructed a collection for St Petersburg that expressed key theoretical themes from Spencer’s research, namely totems, ornamentation, magic, tools and weapons. All the central Australian objects were objects described in Native Tribes of Central Australia. However, compared to the 1902 gift collections, the St Petersburg “Collection List” lacks the ordered symmetry of revolving around magic and totemism — there is no apparent order to the construction of the list.

Vladimir Vladimirovich Swiatlowski, an economist at St Petersburg University and member of the Imperial Academy of Sciences, negotiated the exchange in June 1908 whilst visiting Melbourne on a collecting assignment. Swiatlowski made it clear that he wanted Australian specimens and in return the MAE could supply “Esquimo [sic] objects, etc, by way of exchange” (20/6/1908 NMV Letter book 20: 708). Swiatlowski reported to the MAE that Spencer “wants to make a group scene of Samoyed people riding on a dog sledge, in a panorama similar to his for the residents of Tasmania” (Swiatlowski cited in Rozina 1974: 12). The National Museum of Victoria had virtually no Eurasian objects, but similar to the Haida totem pole, Spencer did not intend to make a comparative exchange based on totemism. Instead, Spencer wanted a visually impressive object, a point on which Mulvaney has criticized Spencer’s judgment arguing, “in retrospect, it might be concluded that the exchange was achieved at undue cost”, although 23 years later Mulvaney reasoned “it proved a popular exhibit for many years, so possibly it constituted a fair exchange” (Mulvaney and Calaby 1985: 250; Mulvaney 2008: 154). Beyond the issue of acquiring a visually impressive object, Spencer was also interested in a display that placed people in their environment, emphasising what Kuklick (2006: 567) has termed, Spencer’s “biogeographical approach”, an approach that would also place Spencer much closer to Boas.28

The director of the MAE, Vasilii Vasil’evich Radloff (also known as Wilhem Radloff) wrote to Spencer in November 1908, asking “besides this [the Samoyed sledge] we beg to inform us [sic], what you would like to have from those specimens of which we dispose mostly, that means Siberia and Central Asia” (Radloff to Spencer 22/11/1908, MV archive 2937). Radloff wanted a bigger exchange and chose totemism and magic as the point of negotiation. In May 1916, Radloff fleshed the idea out further, offering extensive collections of “rustic” and “cult objects” from across the Russian Empire. In return, Radloff used Spencer’s books as a shopping list, requesting “sacred poles churingas [sic], ceremonial head ornaments and other similar objects used in ceremonies”; along with “objects of sorcery”. Both Radloff’s offer and desires reflect an interest, although somewhat belated, in totemism and the origins of religion (Radloff to Spencer 21/4/1916, MV archive 2937). Spencer’s response has not survived, but the line of approach he took on the exchanges of 1908 suggest he would have wanted large visually impressive objects rather than objects of totemism or religion.

Spencer’s exchange history indicates he moved away from totemism as a point of comparison. Therefore, the key reason why he still wanted a Haida totem pole was the fact it was grandiose and would provide a visually spectacular feature in the large Victorian McCoy Hall, the central exhibition space in the National Museum of Victoria — which was a separate room to the ethnology collection that was located in Spencer Hall. As a visually impressive object, the Haida pole bestowed museological status. Most of the leading ethnographic museums in Europe possessed totem poles. Spencer pursued the pole only after one was acquired by the Pitt Rivers Museum as demonstrated by his correspondence with Boas. Therefore as early as 1900 he was thinking of museological status. In 1903, the British Museum also acquired a totem pole, and in the first decade of the twentieth century museums throughout Europe and North America were clamouring for totem poles, most of which were from the Haida community (Joyce 1903; Cole 1995). Charles Newcombe, the British botanist and ethnographer, provided Haida totem poles to both the Pitt Rivers Museum and the British Museum. Spencer took pride in the fact that Newcombe also collected his Haida pole. When he finally received the Haida pole, Spencer displayed it in a very similar way to the Pitt Rivers display. In 1902, Spencer wanted a totem pole for two reasons: one, it was an example of totemism
outside Australia; and two, it visually symbolised the National Museum of Victoria's arrival as an important ethnographic museum.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on two interlinked propositions. First, the paper looked at how Spencer used the idea of totemism to stake his and Gillen's claim in the emerging discipline of anthropology. Second, the paper argued that Spencer's ideas on totemism changed over time; this is partly because of the exchanges he made using material culture. Spencer and Gillen used totemism to conceptualise and focus their work, and this emanated from Spencer's relationship with Fison and Howitt. The details they uncovered were a source of information for metropolitan anthropological thinkers to ponder. In promoting their research, Spencer and Gillen presented collections of material culture to museums as examples or illustrations of the objects in their books. In Spencer's words these collections contained objects that were examples of "Australian totemism". In sending these collections, Spencer and Gillen were following a tradition of nineteenth century museums that exchanged specimens for comparison. This tradition was strongest in the natural sciences and Spencer, a trained biologist, was familiar with regularly sending out collections of fauna after expeditions. His 1902 collections therefore were about building relationships and providing key museums with physical illustrations of his and Gillen's books. The collections reflected Spencer and Gillen's preoccupation with totems and magic.

Spencer's commitment to a global theory of totemism did change over time. Spencer went from being a passive supporter of an evolved link between American totemism and Australian totemism to dismissing a connection altogether. In doing so, he presented a disciplined argument based on local conditions. This also reflected back on Spencer and Gillen's position in the social hierarchy of anthropology. Rather than being a "client" of Frazer's, Spencer was independently responding to Australian conditions and intellectual thought. Spencer was also responding to the material culture he was receiving from overseas. His initial comparison of the totem pole with the nurtunja proved ill conceived and he did not pursue this any further. Over time he received and researched objects, and he distanced himself from any comparison between Australian and American totemism. Totem poles and nurtunjas are visually impressive objects. In connecting them, Spencer was drawing a comparison based on the theory of totemism, but he was also making a statement about what a museum should contain visually. He wanted a totem pole because internationally, metropolitan museums had totem poles and he continued to pursue a totem pole as a symbol of status. This was consistent with his other exchanges, which also focused on gaining large impressive objects.

Endnotes

1 I am using Spencer's spelling of nurtunja throughout the article to maintain the historical consistence of quotations.
2 There is often confusion in descriptions of Spencer as a zoologist or biologist. He was the zoologist on the Horn Expedition and Professor of Biology at the University of Melbourne (See Mulvaney and Calaby 1985: Chapters 5 & 7).
3 I am using ethnology and anthropology interchangeably. Today there is a distinction between ethnology and anthropology however in the 1890s that distinction was only just emerging, and people including Spencer did at times use the words interchangeably. The museum collection was explained as an ethnology and anthropology collection, with objects being ethnology and human remains being anthropology. This insight derives from my reading of every NMV letter book between 1899 and 1922.
4 Dr C Pichet in Geneva 16/11/1892; LC Miall in Yorkshire College, Leeds 13/6/1893; A Klinkowstrom in Stockholm 9/2/1894; J Symington, Queens College, Belfast, 9/2/1894; H Bernard, Royal College of Science, South Kensington, 17/4/1894; Kchobiis, Natural History Museum, Berlin 16/5/1894; Dr W. Michaelsen, Natural History Museum, Hamburg 19/12/94; R. I. Pocock, British Museum of Natural History, 25/6/1895; Frederick McCoy, National Museum of Victoria, 13/7/1895; and later Spencer also received thanks for collections from E.C. Pelly, Redhill, Surrey and A Thomson, The Museum, Oxford, 16/7/1896; G Miscellaneous Letters: 1892-1928, Pitt Rivers Museum Manuscript Collection
5 The Pitt Rivers Museum Catalogue lists only one object coming into the collection from Spencer before 1903 and his surviving correspondence from this period doesn't indicate many specimens.
6 The custom regarding exchanges and gifts was that each museum paid to send its own material. Prior to sending a collection the curator would request cartage from the Government Stores Department. See The MV letter-books.
7 As an indication of influence Fison is listed eight times in Native Tribes of Central Australia, whilst Frazer is listed five times. As Morphy (1997: 30) argues, Frazer and Spencer had only been corresponding for a few years when Spencer and Gillen wrote Native Tribes. Most of the research was conducted before Spencer and Frazer were corresponding.
8 See Pitt Rivers Museum Miscellaneous collection. Sir John Lubbock being one of the few. 1/1/1899

9 For correspondence related to changes to the Customs Act see Atlee Hunt, Department of External Affairs, 26/5/1913 NTn13/5687 in MV Archive, Spencer’s reply 31/5/1913, MV Letter Book; see also correspondence with Queensland Museum. For general complaints, see Balfour letters XM1200.

10 Both the precursor institutions to the Royal Anthropological Institute, the Ethnological Society of London and the Anthropological Society of London had curiosity collections at different times in the nineteenth century. These were combined with the formation of the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1871 but disbanded in 1881 “it was decided to sell the Ethnological collection and to spend the funds on acquiring books for the Library” Sarah Walpole, A70 Report into history of RAI Museum Collections, London: RAI ppl-48. See also Report of Council, 1880 presented to the AGM, 25 Jan. 1881, JAI, 1880, Vol. 10, pp. 438-9


12 It is with an ironic note that these networks of gift patronage were not too dissimilar to cycle of Kula and the ‘gift’ that was an important aspect of theorising for the following generation of anthropologists, in particular Bronislaw Malinowski who, for a few crucial years, was added by Spencer’s patronage (Mulvaney and Calaby 1985: 320-335).

13 Modern spelling: Tjwerengge. Note: For ease of reference and maintaining the integrity of primary quotations, I am using Spencer’s spelling for Aboriginal words.

14 Modern spelling: Anartentye

15 There was also a third collection sent to Franz Boas, that was the same as the deluxe, but overladen with even more objects. Although it only had 86 object “types” it totalled 125 objects.

16 Both Spencer and Gillen comment on the ephemeral and delicate nature of the murtunjas and as such Spencer had to repair them when they reached the museum. He did not just stick to reconstructions: in 1899, possibly with the aid of Gillen, and again in 1908, Spencer created replica murtunjas. In fact the genuineness of the murtunja Spencer sent to Boas at the American Museum of Natural History is ambiguous. The wooden churingas sent to Boas were previously attached to one of the “model” murtunjas constructed by Spencer in 1899 (See ICD catalogue entries x5186, x5246, x5250). This murtunja was supposedly dismantled in 1902 – the same year as the murtunja with those same churingas was sent to Boas (See ICD Catalogue entries for X5655, X5672). Rather than being genuine, the murtunja forwarded to Boas in the American Museum of Natural History was probably an unqualified “model” made by Spencer or Gillen. This research is the focus of a paper in preparation by Gareth Knapman and Jason Gibson.

17 There are a number of copies of letters sent to the Melbourne Museum in the ANHM archive, which don’t survive in Museum Victoria’s archive. Therefore it is possible they didn’t arrive or arrived and weren’t acted upon and henceforth lost.

18 Roth may have been the first to send Spencer in this direction. In a letter to Balfour, Spencer states “I have heard from Roth. In a critique in one of our papers I made some remarks concerning his having mislead the totems but he tells me that as they didn’t fit in with those amongst N.Am. Indians he came to the conclusion that they were not totems in the strict sense of the word”. (28/1/1898 XM1200)

19 20/101898 XM 1151; 4/2/1901 XM1126; 7/6/03 XM1161; 19/8/1902 XM1176

20 See NMV letter books 1899-1911

21 In 1926, Boas wrote to Spencer arguing nothing could be further from the case and inviting him to America, maintaining we have an “opportunity to learn from your wide knowledge of Australia” 24/2/1926

22 In Native Tribes of Central Australia, Spencer mentions the Ilurtunja 195 times, whilst the churinga is mentioned 586 times, with one chapter devoted to the churinga.

23 The model totem pole that Boas sent is collection no X11977.

24 In Broome he purchased boomerangs and collected what were described as “arrow heads” (History 1909: 234)

25 Museum Victoria Indigenous Cultures Department collection catalogue lists 75 objects emanating from Spencer and Gillen out of 175 registered objects and 251 objects that were dispatched in total, a full list is located in MV Archive file 2912 - Field Museum of Natural History.

26 Spencer constructed this murtunja in the museum in 1908 specifically for the exchange. He used surplus raw materials including: an eagle feather ornament he and Gillen collected in 1902 (X10522), two balls of human hair string collected by Mr. J Kilgour (X12413, X12411) and a spear collected by Miss Eugenie Besley. No record exists of the down used.

27 Photographs from the early twentieth century show the Haida totem pole in a different part of the museum to the Australian Aboriginal material. In addition the display notes make no mention of crests as totems, see ICD Col. Doc. File and catalogue entry for X17074.

28 Boas’s approach stemmed from the German geographical tradition. Therefore, he focused on human interactions with the environment (Kuper 1988:125-130). It is possible that Spencer took was possibly influenced by Boas from very early on, although beyound this analogy we have no proof.
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