Elizabeth Grant
‘Inventing’ a Colonial Dark History: The Derby Boab 'Prison' Tree
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‘Inventing’ a Colonial Dark History: The Derby Boab 'Prison' Tree

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Introduction

‘Boabs’ of the Kimberley

Inventing a Colonial Dark History: the Derby Boab 'Prison' Tree

The Kimberley

Gondwana, the Great Southern Continent.
Aboriginal uses for Boabs

The trees are regarded by the Aboriginal people as cherished individuals with unique personalities. There is a strong mythology attached to each individual Boab tree and they often feature in Aboriginal rock art and Dreamtime stories.

Some trees were landmarks for wayfinding or places for ceremony. Others were used as ossuaries where ancestral remains were placed.

The Boab tree was an important food source for the Aboriginal peoples. All parts of the tree - nuts, seeds and roots are edible. A mature Boab tree can reputedly hold 100,000 litres of water in its soft fibrous trunk.

The seeds and bark were harvested for medicinal and nutritional purposes. The seeds have anti-bacterial properties and yield diet-enriching calcium and Vitamin C. The bark was used to treat fever. Modern science has demonstrated it has properties similar to Quinine, an effective and life-saving anti-malarial agent.
Aboriginal uses for Boabs

Rope, baskets, mats and nets were made from the fibrous inner bark of the Boab.

A red dye, obtained from the tree roots is used in traditional artworks.

The seed pods were used for storage or carved for ceremonial purposes.

Early Reporting of the Derby Tree

Herbert Basedow. ‘Narrative of an expedition of exploration in North-Western Australia’ 1916–1917. Described the Derby Tree as being used as an ossuary.

Anthropologist Basedow’s notes

‘It has even been suggested that the Derby tree was used by Aborigines as a resting place for the dead. The natives have long been in the habit of making use of this lusus naturae as a habitation; it is indeed a dry and comfortable hut. Some bleached human bones were lying upon the floor, which suggested that the tribe had also made use of the tree for disposing of the dead. A frontal bone of a skull clearly bore evidence that the individual had fallen a victim to the bullet of a rifle.’ 1910

Policing in the Kimberley

Policing in the Kimberley
The emergence of...

...that old chestnut

In 1948, artist Vlase Zanalis spent eight months camping at Derby and in the surrounding areas. The artist became intrigued with boab trees and Aboriginal subjects. One of the works later exhibited in Sydney entitled ‘The Boab Tree’ was described by the press as: the well-known Boab Tree at Derby in the North West of this State. In the earlier days its trunk was used as a prison of a temporary nature until it was possible to transfer the prisoners to a more permanent abode... This tree has become a famous land mark.


Coalescing ‘truth’ into ‘fact’

In 1988, artist Vlase Zanalis spent eight months camping at Derby and in the surrounding areas. The artist became intrigued with boab trees and Aboriginal subjects. One of the works later exhibited in Sydney entitled ‘The Boab Tree’ was described by the press as: the well-known Boab Tree at Derby in the North West of this State. In the earlier days its trunk was used as a prison of a temporary nature until it was possible to transfer the prisoners to a more permanent abode... This tree has become a famous land mark.


Poems

Touch this gnarled wood, the scooped out
Body of this boab tree
And it answers stone, or steel,
Empty saved for the held air
And the sun’s blunt arrowpoints,
That blur through the holed roofing

Can it ever remind us
Of the alien heart heartbeats
That took the place of its heart?

For here was a prison cell
Here man was a kept shadow
Today it is strange that leaves.


Recognition as a ‘prison tree’

1988 - included in the Western Australian Register of significant trees
1995 - listed on State Register of Heritage Places.

The Prison Tree is significant as much because it has become a symbol for the town of Derby as for the history associated with it. It represents the harsh treatment prisoners often received in the north of Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.
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Introduction

During the late 18th and 19th centuries, Derby became a key port for the pearling industry, with thousands of Aborigines forcibly removed from their communities and imprisoned on Boab Island, also known as Boab Prison. The island became known as a place of isolation and punishment, where the indigenous people were subjected to harsh conditions and forced labor.

The Derby Boab 'Prison' Tree

The Boab tree, referred to as the 'Boab', is a species of Australian native tree, named *Adansonia gregorii*. The tree was traditionally used by indigenous communities for various purposes, including shelter and food. However, during the colonial period, the Boab tree became a symbol of the harsh conditions endured by the prisoners, who were often forced to cut down and use the Boab trees for their own survival.

The Uguion Heritage Trail

The Uguion Heritage Trail is a walking trail that follows the former prison trail to the Boab Prison Tree. It provides visitors with a glimpse into the history of the Boab Island and the impact it had on the local Aborigine communities. The trail is marked with signposts that provide information about the island's past and the stories of the prisoners who were held there.

“New” associations to the pearling industry

The pearling industry played a significant role in the economic development of Derby and the surrounding areas. It was not only a source of wealth but also a labor-intensive industry, where thousands of Aborigines were recruited to work on the pearl farms. The industry faced criticism for its reliance on forced labor and the exploitation of indigenous people. In recent years, there has been a shift towards more ethical practices and the establishment of indigenous-led initiatives to promote sustainable development and cultural preservation.

Current Signage

The signpost at the Uguion Heritage Trail provides information about the Boab Prison Tree and the history of the pearling industry. It serves as a reminder of the colonial past and the importance of acknowledging and learning from the experiences of the indigenous communities.
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Current Signage

Touristic Treatment of a Sacred Place
Thank you

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