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The dual identity of dugong oil: the cross-cultural circulation of an indigenous medicine in 1940s Queensland

Key words

Abstract

On March 24th 1941 Acting Superintendent of Cherbourg Mission contacted the Director of Native Affairs in Brisbane asking for an increase in the shipment of dugong oil. The oil was to be given to Aboriginal people living on Cherbourg Mission to boost their immunity. At the same time, non-Aboriginal individuals were sending enquiries to the Director asking for information about dugong oil. For example the oil was popular among war veterans as a treatment for arthritis and scar tissue. To these consumers, both the Aboriginal people on Cherbourg Mission and war veterans, it seems that dugong oil was a neatly packaged and labelled medicine taken according to doctor's recommendations. On North Stradbroke Island, however, dugong oil had been used as a medical remedy long before the arrival of European settlers. Here the oil did not come with a medical recommendation in a clearly labelled bottle. Rather, the knowledge of procuring and using the oil had been passed down through generations.

As I will argue, the oil had a complex history reflecting the interaction between settlers and Indigenous knowledge in the early colonial period. The position of dugong oil is problematised by its dual identity; seen as Aboriginal by some consumers and European by others. Whether used as a 'scientific' medicine bought at the local chemist, a detested medicine enforced by colonial authorities through the mission nurse, or a remedy passed down through generations, the story of dugong oil uncovers the duality of objects and complicates the history of Aboriginal-European interaction.

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Veronika Neuzilova is a PhD candidate at Griffith University. Her research focuses on the Moreton Bay, Queensland, based dugong industry from the 1840s until the 1930s. Her specific interests are in the inter-racial relations forming in the dugong industry, the use of dugong oil, the product of the industry, as an indigenous medicine in western medical practice and the environmental issues surrounding the closure of the industry.