

WILD AUSTRALIA SHOW TRAVELLING EXHIBITION

Meticulous historical research throughout 2017 has reconstructed what had been a group of anonymous Aboriginal performers into 27 discrete individuals with tribal and home-community identities. How Meston's "Wild Australia Show" Shaped Australian Aboriginal History is a photographic exhibition of a travelling choreographed troupe that is researched, designed and produced by a national multidisciplinary team of researchers and curators, with funding support by an ARC Linkage grant. The tri-state partners, including the Queensland Museum, State Library of New South Wales and Museum Victoria, reflect the interest from the three capital cities where the troupe originally performed.

The eccentric Archie Meston conscripted performers from the Queensland frontier, Northern Territory and the Torres Strait, and took the troupe on a national tour, performing in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne in 1892–1893. The show emerged at a critical time in colonial history, when the perception of Aboriginal people was shifting from one of a threatening population justifiable of extermination, to that of a "subject" people requiring protection. Despite the troupe's hard work and acclaimed performances, the venture eventually went broke and the members were stranded, unable to depart Australian shores for their promised appearance at the Chicago World Fair Exhibition.

Nearly 125 years later in 2017, Professor Paul Memmott and the project team piloted the photo exhibition at the Grafton Regional Art Gallery, birthplace of Meston, as a first step in a travelling version of the 2015 UQ Anthropology Museum exhibition, which will form a kind of rolling dialogue with visitors. This travelling research tour seeks to engage with descendants of troupe members in recovering their ancestral history. By growing the historical evidence about this troupe, the researchers aim to reconstruct social and political events surrounding the tour, such as the level of performer agency and the state of violence at the time. The project team also expects to enhance understanding of the ideology underpinning the first Aboriginal Protection Act, which was drafted with contributions from Meston, and how this ideology has reverberated to today.

Historians hold mixed views about the sincerity, alleged expertise and policy legacy of Archie Meston as an Aboriginal protector, which is a subject of ongoing project research. Biographical data collected by the research team in 2017 drew out a pattern of instability and opportunism in Meston's life, along with a strong desire to portray strength and success. This son of an immigrant Scottish farming family held stints as a newspaper editor, journalist, politician, entrepreneur, and later a self-proclaimed expert on Aboriginal people. Never quite satisfied to sit still, Meston moved houses more often than he changed careers; and his endeavours included multiple scams and bankruptcies.

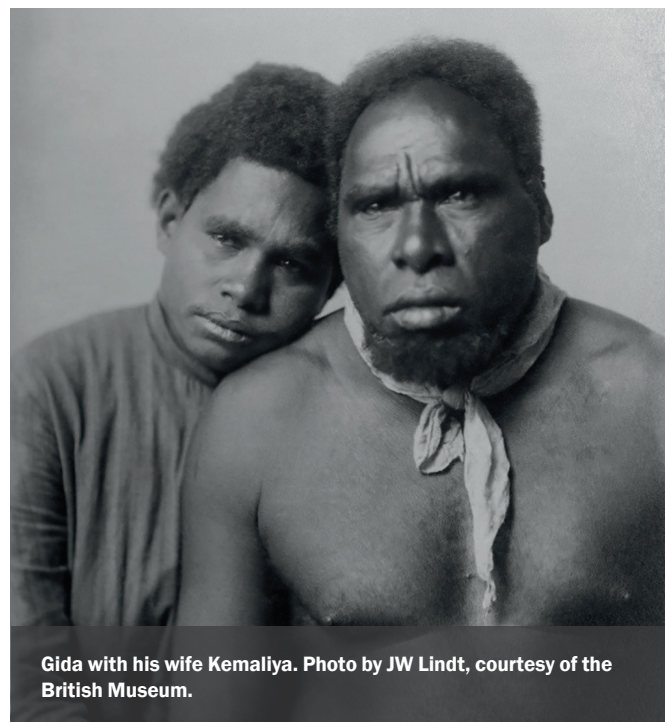
The exhibition of 12 photographic banners, each two metres high and one metre wide, will tour outback centres in 2018 and 2019, travelling to the regional towns where those descendants mostly reside who identify with the tribes of origin of the original troupe members: the western Wakaya in Tennant Creek, the eastern Wakaya and Kalkadoon in Mt Isa, the Kuthant and Kurtjar in Normanton, the Bugulmara and Walangama in Croydon, the Kaurareg at Thursday Island and the Kabi Kabi at Cherbourg.

TROUPE MEMBER SPOTLIGHT: KING GIDA

Gida, pictured below with his wife Kemaliya, was leader of five Kaurareg troupe performers from a community on the north-east side of Prince of Wales Island in the Torres Strait. Gida (born c 1865) had moved there at about five years of age after his people's village on the south-east side of the island was attacked by a punitive expedition, in which some 100 of his relatives were slaughtered for allegedly head-hunting shipwrecked Dutch sailors. Some 20 years later as a grown man of over 6 feet and 17 stone (108 kg), Gida was taken to the newly formed administrative centre of Thursday Island, a tiny island just 3.5 km² within view of Prince of Wales Island, to be trained as a government liaison for his new village. Here he was bestowed with the status-forming title "King Geeda".

Gida and four fellow Kaurareg tribal members went on to perform in the Wild Australia Show in 1892–1893. After returning from the show, Gida's government allegiance and leadership role strengthened, and he was eventually given a cutter to transport village supplies by the Thursday Island Administrator, Hon. John Douglas. Gida was a popular figure who also inherited Douglas's cast-off clothing, and enjoyed dressing up and mimicking Douglas' mannerisms.

Later historical records (c 1899) by anthropologist Charles Haddon identify Gida under the less flattering nickname of "Tarbucket" due to his work as a deckhand on a pearling lugger. Gida had given Haddon a definitive account of the Torres Strait Islands' sacred histories.



Gida with his wife Kemaliya. Photo by JW Lindt, courtesy of the British Museum.

Acknowledgement: *How Meston's "Wild Australia Show" Shaped Australian Aboriginal History* is a long-term flagship project within IDP, a joint initiative of ISSR and UQ's School of Architecture, that aims to improve the quality of life and wellbeing of Australian Indigenous communities through best practice social and environmental designs.