

Boomerangs

Fact Sheet



Carved Club Boomerang. Image: QM.

Introduction

A boomerang is a throwing stick used by Australian Aboriginal people primarily for hunting. While similar weapons are made by cultures all over the world, the consistent history and variety of Australian examples has meant that most people associate boomerangs with Australia. In contrast to spears, boomerangs are thrown to spin through the air and cause damage by clubbing rather than impaling. They do not need to be delivered with the same accuracy as a spear, as the area covered by a spinning stick is greater. Boomerangs are perfect weapons against large upright animals such as kangaroos and emus. They are well suited for use in Australia's predominantly open forests and grasslands.

Varieties

Boomerangs come in many shapes and sizes. Some are evenly curved; others have hooks or flat clubs at one end.

A common misconception is that all boomerangs are returning types. In fact most of the Aboriginal hunting and war boomerangs are designed to travel only in the direction thrown. Non-returning varieties are larger and heavier than the returning ones and have a distinctive hook shape. Returning boomerangs are generally 30–75 cm long and have a greater curve in relation to their length. The arms are slightly twisted to produce the aerodynamics of returning flight. Their aerofoil shape, where the bottom surface is flat while the top is curved, also aids in flight.



Different types of boomerangs. Image: QM.

Making a Boomerang

Boomerangs are traditionally made by men and are constructed from a carefully chosen branch or root with the appropriate shape and grain. Having a natural boomerang shape in the grain of the wood, means that the tip of the boomerang is less likely to break off when it hits the ground. The branch or root is removed from the tree or bush, usually a mulga, gidgea, mangrove or casuarina, and is carved further into shape. It may be heated or moistened to make the wood more supple, then bent and shaped into the final form before being smoothed, greased and decorated.

Traditionally, decorations on boomerangs are produced by carving, burning or painting. Others are clan designs, which only a few related people are allowed to use as they may identify them or demonstrate ownership of land. When used ceremonially, the designs often relate to the ceremony in which the boomerangs are used.



A boomerang being cut from a tree root. Image: Dr. Joseph Bancroft, 1894.

Throwing a Boomerang

Throwing a returning boomerang can be a tricky skill to learn and you must ensure you have a real returning boomerang. You should also practice somewhere with at least 50 meters of open space in all directions around you.

Most boomerangs will return to the same spot if thrown 'around' the wind. For right-handers, this means standing facing the wind, throwing to the right and catching on your left side. Boomerangs work best when thrown at about 50 degrees across the wind and 10 degrees above the ground. Typically this means it should be released at eye-height towards nearby tree-tops. Boomerangs should be thrown vertically with lots of spin, similar to a tennis serve.

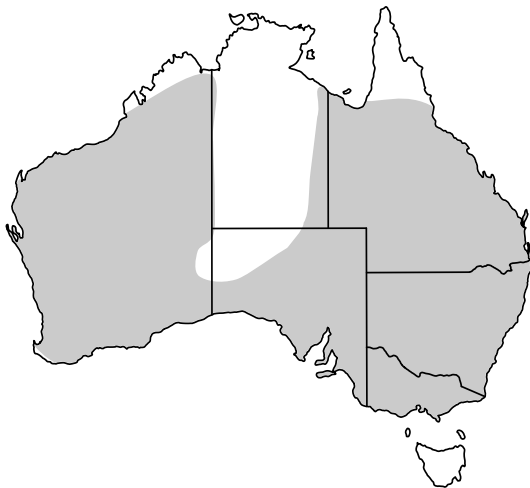
This is often the most difficult part to learn and may involve cocking the boomerang back in your hand and using an arm movement. Let it tear from your grip, rather than let it go.

Origins

The boomerang has a long history in Australia. Images of boomerangs can be seen in rock art and their use probably dates back tens-of-thousands of years. One preserved boomerang found at Wylie Swamp in South Australia was dated at about 10,000 years old.

Despite being used as a symbol of Aboriginality and Australiana, the boomerang was limited in its distribution among Aboriginal people. While most Aboriginal groups were aware of the tool, the people of many areas did not use it – particularly in rainforest areas where the dense foliage does not allow for the flight of a returning boomerang. Boomerangs are not traditionally found in the far north-west Kimberleys, the west of South Australia, north-eastern Arnhem Land, Tasmania, or other offshore islands. They are found throughout Queensland with the exception of Cape York (although rock art in this area suggests they were once used there).

Returning boomerangs have an even more limited distribution, as shown on the map below.



Distribution of returning boomerangs. Image: QM, Elspeth Mackenzie.

The term *bou-mar-rang* was first documented in 1822 and has been adopted from the Dharuk language of the Turuwal people from George's River near Port Jackson, New South Wales. Across Australia there are many other names for boomerangs. For example, on North Stradbroke Island the Goenpul people call them *barragun*, and on Fraser Island the Butchulla people call them *barcan*.

Traditional Use

The boomerang is primarily a weapon for hunting and fighting, but may be used for many purposes. Some of these include making fire, stoking coals, levering bark off trees, digging, clearing areas of ground, cutting cooked meat, and scraping and smoothing other tools. In some regions such as Arnhem Land, boomerangs are unknown as weapons but large decorated pairs are traded from Central Australia and used as clappers to accompany music. They are also used in many parts of Australia in traditional games, dances or rituals.

Most commonly, returning boomerangs are used as children's toys or in exhibitions of skill. They can also be used for hunting by throwing the boomerang above a flock of birds to imitate a bird of prey. When the birds flock down

to escape, they meet the waiting nets of the hunters. Other small game can be frightened towards traps in a similar manner.

The non-returning variety can be used as a hand club, a throwing stick, or can be ricocheted off the ground to strike its quarry. They are used in warfare and to bring down medium size prey like wallabies or goannas. Small, heavy, club-shaped boomerangs from Broome, WA and Port Lincoln, SA are used to kill fish near the surface of the water. One warfare variety from the Northern Territory and Central Australia has a hook at one end that is designed to catch the enemy's shield and swing round behind it. Other large varieties from eastern Central Australia are never thrown, but used like a sword in hand-to-hand combat after all the throwing weapons have been used.

Boomerangs also have a social and spiritual significance. This is most evident in the long distances they are often traded, their exchange during marriage negotiations, and also the many ancestral stories in which they appear.

Modern Use

Today, boomerangs are used throughout the world in recreation and sport. There are international competitions with events such as long distance, fast catch, endurance, trick catch, and accuracy. In addition to wood, modern boomerangs can be made from plywood, plastic, resin, fiberglass, and any number of other materials. They can maintain the traditional curved shape, or take on the latest aerodynamic forms to manipulate lift and drag.

Boomerangs are one of the most popular tourist-trade items in Australia. Many are decorated with Aboriginal designs, while others have modern scenic pictures.

When purchasing a boomerang with Aboriginal designs, it is important to consider buying only from reputable Aboriginal craftsmen or approved outlets, and to respect the cultural origins of this remarkable artifact.



Modern tourist boomerangs. Image: QM.

Further Information

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