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When a Stone Tool Is a Dingo: Country and Relatedness in Australian Aboriginal Notions of Landscape

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Archaeology has long sought to understand the past by studying the “things” left behind by people. There are times, however, when these “things,” although no longer used, still have a significance that is beyond their utilitarian use. This chapter explores how stone tools, although no longer used by the Yanyuwa people of the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria in northern Australia, are still an important part of the landscape and demonstrates the connectedness of “things” to a place and space in the landscape. What is evident is that “things” such as stone tools have an important cosmological place in the landscape and important connections also to people and other living things.

Journey through Country

A line on a map marks the 20-km journey we have made along the edge of the dry creek known as Fletcher Creek, northern Australia. As we traveled, the senior Yanyuwa elders for this country named the places that we knew not, one by one: Nyindiyanantha, Marrawi, Warraba, Warrkala, Yirrinjini, and, finally, our destination, Kalkaji. There are no English names for these places; they are all subsumed on the map by the reference to Fletcher Creek. In the minds of the Yanyuwa men and women traveling in the four-wheel drive vehicle, each named place is distinguishable by topography, vegetation, and their knowledge of the movements of their old people and, perhaps more important on this day, the movements of the Dingo ancestral being.

Kalkaji is a dry creek bed. It has some quartzite outcrops on its eastern bank, with scatterings of completed and partly completed stone blades, as well as numerous pieces of chert (a stone that has been brought in from elsewhere), both worked and unworked. It is the quartzite outcrops, however, and the presence of the worked pieces of this stone that give this locality its other name, Ma-wudawudawiji [“the place of the stone tools”].

Jerry Ngarnawakajarra, the most senior elder, stands alone and cries. He has not seen this place for a long time, having last visited it as a boy, with his father, and he is now probably in his mid-70s. Jerry calls out to the place, apologizing for not having returned for so long. He reminds the place that he is a child of this particular country and asks the spirits of the deceased, who he knows are watching, not to be ignorant toward him and his family that are with him.

Jerry leans down and picks up three well-made quartzite blades, and some smaller chert flakes, and says to those who are now assembled around him (Jerry Ngarnawakajarra, personal communication 1992):
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Ma-ja ma-jamurimuri ma-ngatha, Wurrundurla ma-ja, Wurrundurla namayangul barra, yiwa ambiririjungu kilu-yabimantonyni kulu nganu il-nilakaringu, ma-ja ma-uwulawula wurrbingu yiku ki-Wurrundurlawu kujika barra miku kujika nganinya:
Warra-warraki Warra-warraki Kakami kakamayi Warndama Warndamayi Warra-warraki Warra-warraki Kakami kakamayi

[“This stone tool is my most senior paternal grandfather, this stone tool is the Dingo, it is his fat, he was first to make these things, and we people came behind, these stone tools are truly the Dingo, the song verses for him we sing like this:
Well-made stone blades Discarded flakes lay scattered Flaking the well-made stone blade The well-made blade Discarded flakes lay scattered.”]

Stone tool technology has not been used among the Yanyuwa since the early 1900s, owing mainly to early contact with European explorers and, more important, to contact with Macassan traders from Southeast Asia (Baker 1999; Macknight 1976). Leichhardt also commented that in his initial meeting with the Yanyuwa in 1844 they had a strong sense of understanding the value of steel knives; he associated this with their contact with “Malays” (Roderick 1988: 355). It is still possible to find over Yanyuwa country large caches of glass and steel items put aside to be later turned into tools; stone tools when found are often obliquely referred to as ki-wankalawu [“for the ancestors”].

The short narrative described above took place in 1992, and it is quite clear that the old man still had a knowledgeable relationship to the stone tools. But this was not a relationship based on technological prowess or the making and using of such items. It was, rather, a relationship of power, kinship, and emotion. At the heart of the old man’s statements are two main considerations: one is of “country” and the other, which is related to the first, is the supervital nature of the stone source and of the tools derived from it.

When Jerry Ngarnawakajarra arrived at Kalkaji he had cried out, spoken, and then sung verses from the ritual songline that flows through this most powerful demonstrations of knowledge that can be shown publicly—such songs have come to be known in popular imagination and literature as “song lines.” Known as kujika in Yanyuwa, they are multiverse, sung narratives that track country. These are songs that the Yanyuwa describe as “bringing everything into line.” All living and non-living things, material objects, peoples’ names, the names of the land, the winds, and other seasonal events are all given a place in these songs.

Landscape Becomes “Country”

At one level, one can call these songs environmental narratives, but that would underestimate their purpose and content. The terms environment and landscape are words that the teachers of Western knowledge use to describe the places in which we find ourselves living and working and spending our lived existences. In Yanyuwa, the same word would be awara, a term that can mean earth, dirt, land, place, soil, possessions, sea, reef, and home. Awara in Aboriginal English becomes the word “country,” a term used by many other Indigenous groups throughout Australia (Povinelli 1993; Rose 1992, 1996). However, the meaning given to this word by Indigenous people is much different from that usually attributed to its English version.

For Indigenous people, “country” is spoken about in the same way that people talk about their living human relatives. People cry about country, they worry about country, they listen to country, and they visit country and long to visit country. Objects such as the stone blades are not just a part of country; they are also themselves called “country,” they are part of the kinship and emotional wealth of the country. In return, country can feel, hear, and think; country can also accept and reject, and be hard or easy, just as living people can be to one another. So, it is no surprise that sometimes people also address each other as “country”—that is, as close relatives who bring to that relationship all of their past experience, their now, and their future. When Aboriginal people talk about their country and sing their country, all of these relationships are presented (see also Myers 1986).

An important feature of Jerry Ngarnawakajarra’s journey to the stone quarry site is his ability to name the country where it is located, to name the ancestral being responsible for bringing it into being, and to be able to name the objects themselves; they are all understood to be part of one single numinous event or presence whereby everything is related to all others. A Western reading of that same presence could break the landscape into
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culture, and archaeological evidence. A Yanyuwa understanding of this landscape does not concern such categories; it is rather about the potential of human and nonhuman organisms and objects to move between them, to be related to everything else, and to be recontextualized and reclassified according to context. In other words, people are concerned about and value the possibility (and authority) of potentially endless explorations of webs of interconnectedness (Rose 1997).

Having or not having a name according to context is a way by which people transpose and recontextualize animals and things from the vital (everyday pragmatic sense) to the supervital domains (everyday sense in which the thing/object/being becomes a phenomenon supercharged with meaning). The following example well illustrates this shift and brings to the fore the underlying cultural and moral aspects that are part of any form of classification. As will become apparent, stressing that a living or nonliving thing has a name challenges and blurs the boundaries between these two categories, vital and supervital (Bradley and Tamisari 2004).

The Dingo central to the quarry site of Kalkaji may at once be considered with Law by virtue of its name. The Law in this sense then can be taken to mean a body of moral, jural, and social rules and correct practices that are believed to derive from the cosmogonic actions by which ancestral beings— with the ability of changing from animal and phenomenal forms into humans—shaped and named the land, transforming parts of their bodies into landscape features, natural phenomena, and plants. Along their journeys they also gave life to people at particular places, bestowed these places upon them, and taught each group the correct manner of doing things: from hunting and foraging, processing of food, and the making of tools to the performance of paintings, songs, and dances. Each cosmogonic action of bodily transformation thus establishes a consubstantial relationship between an ancestral being, a place and a group of people who identify with the land and own it (Bradley 2006). The image of the journey is held to be the mechanism that orders, distributes, and differentiates groups’ rights to and ownership of particular tracts of land or “countries.” The names given to the Dingo and his fat, the latter being the source of the stone tools that are still his fat in another form, connect both the ancestral Dingo, the dingoes still to be found in this country today, and the stone tools transformed in locally emplaced cosmogonic actions during those events popularly known in English as “the Dreaming.” Together, Dingo, stone of the land, and together they remain property of their owner. A dingo can be seen in the landscape and has ancestral Law; likewise, a stone tool can be seen—and in the past it was used in daily life—and it, too, can be kin, because it has Law by having a name. What is important here is that the shift from the vital to the supervital is carried out according to context. In some circumstances, dingoes are simply dingoes, stone tools are just stone tools; but at other times they are relatives, and the action of singing the country and the stone tools’ immediacy and presence in place relates them to the manifestations of ancestral beings associated with country (see also Williams 1986).

Thus, the names used by the Yanyuwa elder derive from a specific place and have associated with them a number of meanings, any one of which may be called on, depending on need and context. The name links the individual to species and to place. At one and the same time, these names become an expression of the supervital qualities of both the Dingo and the stone tools. In the example above, the notion of stone also being the fat of the Dingo is also seen as an expression of health, vitality, and power in Yanyuwa cosmology (see also Jones and White 1988).

What becomes apparent, then, for the Yanyuwa people is that the reality of objects such as a stone quarry and associated evidence of its use, even in a contemporary context, is based on a logic that allows for the oscillation between human and nonhuman, intention and nonintention, social and nonsocial, moral and amoral, poetic and nonpoetic—divisions that are not binaries but the points between which the vital and supervital may be observed in action. It is the vitality and the supervitality of living worlds as known by the Yanyuwa that point to all classifications, encompassing not only different logics or ways of reasoning but also, most importantly, the fact that such classifications are grounded in social action.

Angles of Perception

The observations above illustrate several critical points for disciplines such as archaeology and social anthropology. The first concerns the personal, cultural, and theoretical expectations that every field researcher brings to his or her tasks. Whether the focus is a search for objects or language and culture, these expectations will influence what questions are asked, how they are asked, and whom they are asked of (Peacock 1987; Watson 1987). Such an argument applies to any academic discipline, and, of course, the answers given are sub-
if an archaeologist had come across the quarry at Kalkaji without the presence of any Yanyuwa people, or whether an anthropologist would have even noticed the feature. Importantly, our findings always sit within wider contexts of debate, so although our personal preferences may be attributed to a particular history and life experience, these preferences are also subject to a prevailing social climate in which we see what we have been trained to see (Peacock 1987).

However, as the case study above demonstrates, a geographical, or historicized, archaeological version of the apparently “real landscape” is not the only version, since for some people, such as Indigenous Australians, an archaeologically derived landscape may not even be credible. Nonetheless, archaeological views, if left embedded in the dominant, and seemingly powerful, Western discourses and “tradition,” may blind us to other cultural alternatives, something very much at issue when as archaeologists or social anthropologists we are often taught to perform within the pervasive logic of a so-called objective enquiry. This all suggests that what we might call multiple subjectivities, and consider “obstacles to be overcome” (Rose 1997: 73) in the quest for an objective, universal, and abiding truth, may in reality be understood as invaluable and integral elements in Indigenous Australian systems of knowledge. Thus Aboriginal “subjectivities” represent other “angles of perception,” just as much as conventional archaeological landscapes also remain “subjectivities” and other “angles of perception,” all contributing to the sum of what is known.

Conclusions

So often academic discussion concerning Indigenous attachment to country is defined solely in terms of functional or material outcomes, as the object of practice, and only sparse (if any) reference is made to the particular social perceptions that inform both the historical and the contemporary understandings of these activities. It is, therefore, not surprising that Indigenous people sometimes consider the “findings” of such observers with degrees of anger, acceptance, and sometimes humor, and their translations of what has been observed have been rendered to child-like or quaint interpretations (Povinelli 1993: 695). As can be seen by the landscape perceptions that the Yanyuwa applied to the quarry site at Kalkaji, understanding is multilayered and not easily reduced to the language of objectivism whereby object and subject, language and speech, place entities. Therefore, to gain entry into those worlds, attempts must be made to examine or even at times to deconstruct some of the basic and taken-for-granted assumptions that underpin Western knowledge systems in which landscapes can be measured as external contexts of human presence and human action. Indigenous approaches to landscape present new archaeological opportunities to understanding country beyond specifying just processes, toward examining the subjective, emotional, and “imagined” phenomena from which landscapes are created (see Tamisari and Wallace 2006; see also Russell, this volume).

The example given at the beginning of this chapter illustrates how for people like the Yanyuwa their “country” or landscape is full of meaning—meaning that is derived from intersecting trajectories of history, kinship, and spirituality (Kearny and Bradley 2006). Time and place collapse at such locations as the quarry and remind us that when an archaeologist or anthropologist enters such a place he or she is historicizing both the engaged landscape and the objects and environments that may be found there. Such places as the quarry at Kalkaji are thick with meaning and force us to rethink how we may view history. People such as the Yanyuwa, prior to modern times, never had a word for history; they have since borrowed the English term. History as we know it from Western ontology and epistemology seeks to retain an impersonal, exact record of past events. Instead, the Yanyuwa have always had a word for “remembering” (linginmantharra), which requires past events to be experienced from a personal perspective. Once people live through certain events, their significance becomes etched into their memories. It is these memories, full of meaning that the Yanyuwa have constantly sought to maintain. The power of knowing one’s “master story,” the dominant details that give meaning to large and small moments alike, is that the story can never be relegated to the back of a historical bookshelf or an academic text.

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