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**Life Down Under: Water and Identity in an
Aboriginal Cultural Landscape**

Veronica Strang

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Image: Lefty Yam at Molorr Ampungk (Two Girl Story). Courtesy Veronica Strang

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*Rainbow, well we all come from the rainbow.
The whole lot of us. (Lefty Yam)¹*

Summary

Focusing on water resources this paper traces the conceptual relationships between the formal characteristics of water, the ways in which these are experienced and observed, and the imaginative use made of these qualities in the representational imagery which describes each aspect of Aboriginal life. It considers how these relationships provide systemic coherence in Aboriginal cosmology, and how they are used to define Aboriginality internally and to other groups. It argues that the consistent location of linked conceptual models in 'real world' material objects and processes gives great resilience to Aboriginal cultural forms, enabling indigenous groups to maintain ideational continuities in a challenging political context.

¹ In the text, oral quotes are indented and (except for language terms) italicised, and informants' full names are given. Unless indicated otherwise, all of the quotes in this particular article are from Kunjen elders, which is the language group I work with the most closely. Quotes from written sources are indented in plain text, and are identified with the author's surname, the date of publication, and the page number.

Introduction

Indigenous groups in the Pacific Region have long provided an excellent focus for analyses concerned with the dynamic construction of cultural landscapes (eg. Munn 1973, 1984, Layton 1989, Morphy 1991, Rose 1992). Such work demonstrates how people have made use of the material features of their environment in their cosmological constructs, for example in defining totemic categories and other organisational principles. Some writers have explored the landscape as a repository for cultural knowledge and memory (eg. Kuchler 1993) or the affective values of embedding human and spiritual being in the land (eg. Morphy 1991, Rose 1996, Strang 1997). Others have considered the sensory stimuli within particular environments and their influence on cultural interpretation (eg. Feld 1996, Gell 1995).

In this paper I examine the relationship between material experience and cultural meaning, detailing the ways in which formal characteristics of water are imaginatively employed in an Aboriginal cultural landscape and in the construction and representation of Aboriginality. I have focused upon water for several reasons: because it is culturally and physically the most important aspect of the natural environment and the most crucial for survival; because its usage within Aboriginal beliefs and practice is well documented; and also because it is an element likely to permit useful cross-cultural comparison.² I hope to show how imaginative engagement with the physical characteristics of water assists in the

maintenance of intellectual continuity in Aboriginal cosmology, despite many external pressures, and how the use of hydrological processes as a conceptual model assists indigenous groups' negotiations in modern political conflicts.

I have approached the topic primarily from a perspective of art and material culture analysis, considering water as an acculturated object whose formal characteristics influence its symbolic meanings. The work of writers such as Gell (1992), Morphy (1991) and Ingold (1995, 2000), have made it clear that all aspects of the environment are acculturated, even if this entails no physical use or transformation. Also relevant is the literature concerned with identity and interaction with place (eg. Hall and DuGay 1996, Beckett 1988, Gellner 1991, 1994). Experience of the 'natural' world is not usually foregrounded in relation to the construction of identity, but it should not be underestimated as a basis for concepts about 'being'³. This has particular relevance in the case of water. Water is not only essential to survival, but is also literally the major constituent – 'essence' – of human physical being. Both physically and metaphorically it links the individual to the environment, connecting the human body with every other living object. Like food or air it is ingested by humans and is therefore readily perceived as a flow between the internal and external self (see Caplan 1997, Lupton 1996). In an Aboriginal cosmos it is linked with ideas about blood and social identity.

As in any material culture analysis we also have to consider water's other formal characteristics. The most important of these is that it is vital to the creation and sustenance of life in all its forms. It is also fluid, and changes from one form into another – ice, water, steam, clouds, rain. It is always moving or changing: shimmering, pouring, evaporating, and so forth. It therefore lends itself to metaphors concerned with transformation and processes of change.

An Essential Context

The following case study is based upon long-term fieldwork in Cape York in the Aboriginal community of Kowanyama, and draws on related ethnographic research.⁴ Located on the coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria, Kowanyama contains approximately 1200 people who are members of three language groups, the Yir Yoront, the Kokobera, and the Kunjen.⁵ The settlement is within an exemption reserve area of about 1000 square miles created in response to the aggressive colonial invasions in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The site chosen for this haven was an important water place – indeed the name, Kowanyama, translates as 'place of many

waters'. For the first half of the 20th century the community combined hunting and gathering with introduced modes of livelihood – mission horticulture and stockwork on the surrounding cattle stations. Christianity was imposed and to some degree accepted, but people quietly maintained their own beliefs under this more abstract layer of explanation. In the second half of the century, like many such communities, Kowanyama passed from Mission to State control, and then gradually achieved some degree of self-government, the reserve being handed to a local Council as Deed of Grant in Trust (DOGIT) land in 1987.

Today its members have largely ceased to work for the pastoralists, and are focusing their energies on negotiations and legal endeavours which, if they are successful, will permit them either to manage or regain ownership of their traditional land, which extends far beyond the DOGIT boundaries. Struggling with the social and economic legacies of colonial dispossession, the community inhabits a complex and difficult political environment. People are keenly aware that with the steady inflow of European beliefs and values, social and economic practices and different ways of interacting with the environment, their own cosmology is under a great deal of pressure. However, as this paper demonstrates, the continuities within Aboriginal belief systems are also a major source of strength in their negotiations.

It is useful to approach this belief system by considering the ways in which water is experienced in western Cape York. A flat tropical savannah, it has very distinct wet and dry seasons: for half the year there is continual downpour and floods, and for the other half a rapid parching into almost desert-like conditions in which water sources can be hard to find. Water is either almost everywhere or almost nowhere, overwhelming the land or dwindling away into isolated waterholes, invisible wells, or tiny cupfuls underneath giant antbeds or in the swollen limbs of ti-trees. In temperatures which can easily climb above 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit), knowing how to find it can be a matter of life and death. The inhabitants of this landscape are therefore presented with an annual cycle in which the lush greenery which emerges with the rains rapidly becomes a desiccated dustbowl.

This extreme cyclical alternation had a powerful influence upon traditional patterns of land use. People moved about extensively in the dry season, meeting for communal fishing and hunting enterprises, and for the economic and social exchanges needed to maintain a flow of people and resources among scattered hunter-gatherer clans. Such meetings would take place at the sparse waterholes where game, fish and other resources would also be concentrated. In the Wet families built humpies⁶ up on the sand ridges above the floods, and made longer term camps, often near the major swamps

² The research I have drawn upon in this paper is linked to related research on water and its cultural meanings in river catchments in the UK (Strang 2001c), and forms part of a discussion about cross-cultural issues with other environmental anthropologists in Australia and elsewhere.

³ As I have argued elsewhere in relation to the Australian pastoralists' subculture (Strang 2001a)

⁴ See McConnel 1930, 1957, Sharp 1937, Sutton 1978, Von Sturmer 1978 Alpher 1991, Taylor 1984.

⁵ Kunjen is a general term for several related subgroups previously located to the north-east of Kowanyama.

⁶ Humpies are shelters made from bowed branches and (in Cape York) these are covered with cabbage palm leaves.

which teem with wildlife at this time of year. Thus human annual cycles moved up and down with water levels in the environment, and were also in concert with the movements of many animal and bird species. Most economic and social activities centred on water sources of one sort or another. As well as camping alongside freshwater for drinking and cooking purposes, people's primary source of food gathering was – and indeed still is – fish and other resources from in and around rivers, waterholes and the sea shore.

It is fair to say, therefore, that the vast majority of traditional economic activities focused intensely on water sources, and that camp sites were located either to avoid inundation in the Wet, or to remain close to dwindling waterholes and wells in the Dry. As both Layton (1995) and Morphy (1993) have noted, sacred sites (or as they are called locally, 'poison places'⁷) are most often located at the major waterholes and resource concentrations, and these have also been the focus of competition from European settlers, who share a need for reliable water resources. Traditional economic activities therefore articulated very closely with the movement of water through this landscape. Although people now tend to remain in the settlement during the Wet,⁸ hunting and gathering during the Dry season generally entails a return to important water places and the collection of related resources.

Fishing expeditions invariably include a number of children who play in or around

the waterhole. In many situations swimming is dangerous because of the crocodiles which are frequently left in waterholes when the rivers shrink, and which are numerous in the coastal estuaries (the latter are also the breeding grounds for sharks). However, in rapids or small waterholes which are unlikely to contain crocodiles, children swim and people 'bogey' [bathe] freely. One of the great recent luxuries of the settlement in Kowanyama is its communal swimming pool, which is constantly full of children.

Water is also factored into the community's new developments. 'Homeland developments'⁹ are situated close to key water resources, and one of the priorities is that the newly constructed sheds and houses at homeland sites should have large

⁷ In local Aboriginal English the term 'poison' means powerful and/or dangerous. Thus people have 'poison' relatives whom they must avoid, and 'poison' places where the ancestral forces are particularly focused.

⁸ It is very difficult to move around in the Wet: the dusty roads turn to a muddy morass as soon as the first rains fall, so people must either walk, or make use of horses, boats or small planes. Many people in Kowanyama have traditional land a long way from the settlement. Increasing numbers of people now own cars, but these are no use in the Wet.

⁹ These are places seen as central to the traditional areas of particular groups. They used to be called 'outstations' but the pastoralist overtones of this term are now unpalatable, and there is an obvious political statement in the term 'homelands'. With limited resources most such developments are – as yet – just a shed or two, but they are a keen focus of enthusiasm and hope in the community, enabling at least a partial return to living on traditional country. Some families now spend a significant proportion of the dry season camped out at homeland sites, although this is constrained by economic needs, and State requirements that children.

rainwater collection tanks. Discussions have also been underway for a long time about the potential for various forms of aquaculture which would improve the community's economic self-sufficiency. The neighbouring settlement in Pormpuraaw has a crocodile farm, and Kowanyama has been considering the possibility of fish or crayfish farming as a way of producing income. Thus water remains a central source of wealth even in the most recent formulations of economic activity.

Under Water

How is this practical engagement with water conceptualised in an indigenous cosmos? As has been amply illustrated by many ethnographers, the cosmologies of Aboriginal people all over the continent share major themes. The world was created in the Dreamtime or, as it is called in north Queensland, the Story Time. As described in the stories and song cycles which comprise 'the Law', ancestral beings emerged from the land, travelled across it, acted upon it, formed its features, named everything in it and re-entered the land to remain there as a continuing source of power. In doing so they also became the totemic ancestors of human clans, defining the areas of land belonging to each and their relationships with each other.

Although this era is most commonly described as a time, it is more accurately framed in spatial terms as a separate dimension or plane of existence: a place of 'invisibility' from which things 'become visible' (Morton 1985, 1987), a holding of

life 'inside' or under the surface of the land, which emerges, acts and re-enters, or a 'coming out' into materiality (Munn 1970, Morphy 1995). Similarly, in Kowanyama, although people describe events of the Story Time, they talk about it as a place where things happen: a domain separated by materiality or non-materiality rather than temporality.

Water has a very interesting place in this cosmology. Most of the ancestral beings who created the world emerged from waterholes or water sources of one kind or another, in effect as 'life creators' coming out of the 'life substance' held in or under the surface of the land. Often their own substances became the creative matter in the world, and this is particularly important in relation to blood, offering a cultural model of ancestral 'blood relations' which has continued to have precedence over imposed European concepts of blood as a definition of Aboriginal identity. For example, noting that blood is 'one of the major symbolic substances of Yolngu culture' (1991:189), Morphy records a typical creation story in which the blood of a female ancestral being, Nyapililingu, 'flowed into the lake and became the spiritual generator of subsequent generations of Manggalili clan members' (1991:283). Thus the blood of the ancestral being became the water from which the totemic clans emerged. Blood, water and social being are similarly conflated in Kowanyama: clan and individual identity are defined by water sources, and the socio-spatial relations between clans are often

described in terms of their positioning along rivers and creeks, or along the sea shore, with descriptions of how one clan 'comes [flows] into' the country (and identity) of another. In an important Dreamtime story, the first local ancestor to gain the knowledge and power to do *puri puri* (sorcery) does so by searching for a tree which is also an ancestor, hitting trees with his boomerang until he finds one that contains blood – which might equally well be defined as ancestral 'substance'.

See that tree there? Gum tree there? He bin hit that one with that same boomerang, he look: 'no, no blood'. He try all this tree, gum tree, bloodwood, every tree he try. No blood. All right, he keep on goin', singing away, you know, old paten [songs]... Special thing, special, that what he bin after. Every tree he try. And he bin try that cotton tree now, cotton tree. Hit that one. All blood bin shoot out. 'Oh, this the one!' he bin run up la him shake him, shake him, drag him, knock him down that tree... That tree, he turn into person and get up. (Lefty Yam)

In their shift from underwater to the surface and back again – from one dimension to another – ancestral beings experienced transformations from immanence in environmental substance to embodiment, and back again. Their blood becomes water when, in the Dreamtime, they 'sit down', and pour their energies into the land; it is reconstituted as blood when they or their

descendants emerge from water sources and are manifested or 'become visible'. Thus blood and water – in various stages of transformation – constitute the manifestations of social and spiritual being which emerge from and re-enter the land.

In some analyses the aptly-named 'Dreaming' has also been read as a metaphor for unconscious potential which can shift to conscious action. Although psychoanalytic approaches to Aboriginal mythology¹⁰ are now rarely referred to, it is tempting in this context (though problematic in that it suggests cross-cultural commonality) to refer to Jung's assertion that water bodies are symbolic archetypes that represent the great sea of the unconscious and its potentialities. Certainly water sources contain potent and often uncontrollable forces in an Aboriginal cosmos, which manifest themselves – or 'surface' – in ancestral beings who take form and act upon the world with conscious intent before returning to the formless pool of ancestral forces held in the land.

Of all the ancestral beings in Australian mythology, the most powerful – and often regarded as the source of all of the others – is the Rainbow Serpent. This appears in stories all over Australia, most commonly as a great snake lying beneath major sacred sites which, as mentioned previously, are often water sources. Being analogous to the rainbows in the sky – which obviously only appear with the coming of rain – it is, in a

sense, composed of water and completes an implicit circle/cycle of movement between earth and sky, invisibility and visibility. In 'becoming visible' in ancestral stories it appears as a serpent, but the stories suggest that this embodiment is simply a way of taking form which allows its potency to be expressed. Such a form is appropriate, retaining analogous characteristics: the Rainbow Serpent moves with fluidity and shimmers with many colours, flows down rivers and creeks, swirls in pools, coils into whirlpools which swallow people, wriggles down under the land, resurfaces and vomits life out into the world. The rain and the Rainbow Serpent encompass all kinds of water, as Rose comments:

Rain is conceptually linked to all water, and different colour rains are conceptually linked to different coloured river water... River water relates to the action of the rainbow snake, as does the rain itself. So there is a complex and interconnected set of ideas about water which relate to the rainbow snake. (1986:12)

The Rainbow Serpent is creative, transformational, intensely powerful and often very dangerous. It features in a multitude of creation myths: for example in the traditional country of the Kunjen people, at Rainbow Story Place (Ewarr), the accompanying story describes the Rainbow coming underground with great force, breaking all the roots of the trees, and carving a river into the landscape,

with the water surging up behind the giant serpent.

Ewarr... that's the Rainbow, [or] An-ganb, An-ganb. He bring flying fox... carry him in a bag, inside him... Go underground... Water follow him behind... breaking all the root – grobgroggrob! (Lefty Yam)

Quite often, in local myths, the Rainbow swallows and transforms other ancestral beings, thus creating features of the landscape. In Two Girls Story (*Molorr Ampungk*), just south of the Alice River, two ancestral women are swallowed by a rainbow catfish (though 'he bin rainbow, not a catfish') which turns them into date palm trees which now mark that site. And sometimes the Rainbow merely swallows and keeps people, particularly those who are not meant to be there. For example, at Water Rainbow Story (*Og Ewarr*), also near the river, a 'Man Rainbow' (ie. a male one) pulled an ancestral fisherman under the water:

This man, he fishing there, in the middle of the water... Rainbow come along and he seen him. 'Oh, young feller here'. He sneak up on him... Poor bugger, this time he still there, fishing, trying to catch fish, he take a lot of fish too – right in the middle... Rainbow really come for him. Not a Mother Rainbow, Man Rainbow... Take him then, hide him in there. Still today, he still gone, that man, young feller. Old Dad Rainbow bin take him away you

¹⁰ For example, Roheim 1945, Eliade 1958, Hiatt 1984.

see... *Yeah, that's why we say [call] him Cheeky Rainbow, Cheeky Rainbow – Og Ewarr, we call him. That's cheeky one. Og Ewarr¹¹ ... He wouldn't let him out at all... Never swallow, never kill him – just keep for himself. He might be turned [in] to Rainbow himself, that young fellow. (Id.)*

According to the same informant, it is only the 'Father Rainbow' that keeps people; the 'Mother Rainbow' allows them to come back. There are several issues here: one that the male rainbow is presented as a powerful protector of the land. The ancestral forces create a sentient landscape which knows who is meant to be there, and acts malevolently against strangers. In this story the Water Rainbow takes the fisherman because he came to this place without permission.

The other major issue is the gendering of the Rainbows. Numerous myths and rain-making or increase rituals present rain as semen and therefore obviously male. Increase rituals, designed to stimulate the land to reproduce resources, are often homologous, in that they use metaphors based on the human body and its processes (see Tonkinson 1974, Strang 1999). In Kowanyama they generally involve the throwing of leaves, bark, dust, stones or water in particular directions, or into water sources, which is conceptualised

as a process of scattering powerful creative matter and thus manifesting ancestral forces. For example, at Watum Yard, in Kunjen clan country near the Alice river, there is a site linked to Darkness Story:

They make the rain here, they got bushes out there... They get the leaf and put 'em in the water down here. Big rain come, and strong wind, big strong wind, just like cyclone, he lift everybody up. If you walking about out here, someone, lift you, carry you down to that main place over there. (Victor Highbury)

Rain making ceremonies often involve the spitting or scattering of white quartz stones, which are held to resemble semen, and Kolig (1987) reports the use of stone rods carved to resemble penises in rituals to induce rain. Morton notes Strehlow's (1947) description of the enactment of the activities of a phallic ancestral being in which the actor, having covered his body with down, dances vigorously to scatter it onto the ground. The ritual, called *alkngantama*, means 'to throw out seed'. 'The down ...will turn into animals and plants of the totem... after the next summer rains' (Morton, 1987:457).

In the fifty years since this ritual was recorded Aboriginal people have been coerced – by missionaries, settlers and more recently the State – into participating in the wider cash economy. Nevertheless, the conceptual frames which described the reproduction of wealth and power in a

hunting and gathering economy are applied to contemporary events. For example, at a meeting held near Pormpuraaw in August 2000 (convened to celebrate the return of some traditional land to local clans and to discuss indigenous governance), a leader from an Aboriginal community further east expressed concern that the Government funding disbursed to Aboriginal groups was being held up by local leaders seduced by the prospect of monetary wealth:

Black leaders today are on cloud nine but forget to send rain down onto the land...When I talk about the rain that comes every year and gives life to the land, I am talking about the life of a human being... The dollar signs, the dollars are making our leaders forget about the Dreamtime. (Richard Aken)

Leaders are regularly exhorted not to forget that real potency lies in the land. The same generative principles apply to the reproduction of human beings. Near Kowanyama, the waterhole at Baby Story Place is said to contain a 'water fairy' which is so powerful that if anyone scatters dirt from around that waterhole all of the women in the area will become inflamed with passion, leading to the creation of many babies:

That's right mate, if we stir [disturb] this place now all they young girl go mad, chase men, anyone, anyone at all – they'll go mad if we stir this place. (Victor Highbury)

Although Aboriginal cosmology suggests that rain and clouds are gendered as male through these kinds of associations, the cosmos doesn't divide neatly into a duality of male/rain/sky, female/earth/land (Rose 1986). The land is divided into both male/dry and female/water domains, and, conversely, dryness and heat are associated with femaleness in other contexts. As the Kunjen story illustrates, there are also 'Mother' Rainbows. I therefore concur with Rose's contention that the cosmos is best described as androgynous, having a complex mix of female and male associations. Rain and moving or active waters are more generally associated with maleness/semen, and still and 'containing' water held in the land more often represents femaleness/the womb, but the generative power which also creates human 'being' is a combination of both (see also Tonkinson 1978). This is amply demonstrated by a set of ideas about human genesis, in which 'spirit children' are believed to 'jump up' from water sources in the landscape (or from coastal seawaters) to invigorate the foetus in the mother's womb. Such events are indicated by a signal in the environment, for example the sighting of an animal that is particularly large or unusual in some way, which is usually shown to the father or a close relative. Sometimes it is 'carried' by the father to the mother. Thus a Kunjen elder, sitting alongside a lagoon, describes how the baby comes from a 'Mother Rainbow' in the water:

Yeah, the rainbow give us, show 'em to father or mother... Baby eh, baby, might

¹¹ In local English, 'cheeky' means full of life or powerful, but also hints at something being out of control or too strong to control. The name of the story, *Og Ewarr*, simply means Water Rainbow.

*be baby here, in this [waterhole] here.
Old Dad might see him: 'Oh, my baby
here'. Because that Rainbow here...
Baby come from water, you see. All
Kowanyama [people] same way, baby
he¹² got to get him [from] water too.
(Lefty Yam)*

A Yir Yoront elder similarly described to Alpher how his father found his baby spirit while spearing stingrays in the sea:

[My] spirit child – my father went for fish to the west there, to the sea. He was spearing stingrays... And then that leech swam towards him... it came and stuck on, chan! It stuck on that spear. Then he looked – and it was gone. 'This – this [is a] person... it might be a spirit-child'. The spirit-child was there in the west at *Par Tanvm*. My place... And my father found me there. (Jerry Mission, audio tape, Alpher 1987; see also Alpher 1991).

The coastal site or waterhole where the spirit child emerges will then become the child's 'spirit home' (*errk elampungk*), creating an irrevocable link between the place and the individual. As well as providing a 'home place' throughout that person's life, it is also the site to which her or his spirit must return at death to be reunited with the ancestral forces.

¹² It should be pointed out that in Aboriginal English 'he' is a gender neutral term which can mean he or she.

Thus in an Aboriginal cosmos water is the life force within several congruent cycles which move out of the earth and back into it: the great Dreaming cycle through which the world was created; the annual hydrological cycle of water from sky to earth and back again to produce all life; and the human spiritual cycle from life to death, visibility to invisibility. In each of these water, held in the land, contains the potentiality – the potency – which enlivens the whole cycle of production and reproduction of both resources and people. And water is also the common substance of the living organisms which share these life cycles, linking them in a coherent set of physical and metaphysical relationships.

Water Marks

At a more pragmatic level, on the surface/material/visible plane, water also acts as a circulatory medium. As well as locating individuals in the land, the water sites which are their spiritual homes also place them in a socio-spatial network of kin. As noted previously, each totemic site defines their rights to the surrounding 'country' [tract of land] and its resources, and their relationships with other groups. In this sense ancestral totems and their 'story tracks' distribute people across the landscape in such a way that clan groups, linked by kinship and obligations for exchange, inhabit and use the land and its resources in an efficient and highly sustainable way. Some of these totems are animal or – commonly in Queensland – bird species; others are natural elements, including water. Thus some clans

or individuals are named for floodwater, others for clouds. There are some broad categories of inland 'freshwater' people and coastal 'saltwater' groups, and clan relations are often conceptualised in terms of being upriver or downriver, coastal or inland.¹³ In Kowanyama there are many more subtle categories of water too: inside and outside water, private water, new water, secret water and so on, that only the old people know about (see Sutton 1980). Water therefore 'identifies' people, either via water totems or, indirectly, via association with sacred sites focused upon water.

In this carefully balanced 'socio-ecosystem', water is also a major material link between groups and between sacred sites. A significant proportion of ancestral beings moved along or created water courses or made wells and other water places. The land of related clans is often linked by particular water courses, just as they are linked by series of events in ancestral mythology, and, cutting through the land, water can also serve as a boundary marker between groups. As a result, there is enormous overlap between any topographical map of the water courses or other water sites in the environment and the spatial arrangement of the ancestral tracks and story places which locate clans and link them to each other. Water is thus a medium through which people and resources are organised spatially,

¹³ These kinds of categorisations are common throughout Australia: for example Goodall describes naming systems in New South Wales in which the Paakantji people's name itself means 'belonging to the river' (1996:15).

socially and economically across a particular landscape.

Fons Sapientiae

Each of the processes outlined above are of course cycles of reproduction which generate and maintain Aboriginal people themselves, their environment and their cultural forms – their cosmological beliefs and their economic, social and political organisation. In a sense, the most important resource to be reproduced and transmitted from one generation to the next is cultural knowledge. In Aboriginal terms, all customary knowledge is within 'the Law' – the body of ancestral stories held by each group. As well as containing all of the organisational principles of Aboriginal life these are also a vast repository of environmental knowledge, providing maps of the landscape and details about local species, their habitats and ways of making use of and managing them. Therefore at one level they provide practical information which is economically and socially vital, and at another their layers of meaning lead to spiritual knowledge and empowerment. In political terms this is a gerontocratic society. Human life is conceptualised as a process of reliving the lives of the ancestors and gaining knowledge, power and responsibility over time. Greater knowledge brings people 'closer to' the ancestral forces. They are accorded greater status in consequence, and the most respect is given to those who acquire deep spiritual knowledge – the inner meanings of places and stories, and the

Some sites are simply so powerful that they have to be avoided: for example a number of springs and creeks or waterholes in the area are so 'poison' that drinking from them will 'cripple you up'. The country can express anger at any transgression and extreme malevolence towards strangers: they may become sick, or get injured, devils might abduct them, or they might even be consumed by cannibal ghosts. Water plays a powerful role here too, since malevolence is often manifested in the form of storms or floods, or of course Rainbow serpents, which arise and seize the intruders.¹⁵ The only way in which harm can be averted is for strangers to be 'baptised' into that country. Though a Christian term is used to translate the ritual (and of course there is a parallel Christian concept about baptism signifying social inclusion) it is a wholly Aboriginal 'custom way' of enabling the country to recognise a person as part of the group who has a right to be there. It is also done for the small children within the group, who may not have been to that place before, usually by pouring of water over their heads:

Have to baptise them little children you know... or they might not be able to travel about, run around. Put them in water, put hand on their head, baptise them. That devil, he know that feller bin get baptised here. Probably say 'Oh that's this feller here' – he won't take that little feller away. If he not baptised,

well that devil might come along and grab that baby, take him away [into] the bush. (Ronnie Smiler)

The same ritual is conducted for any visitors, sometimes described as 'putting the smell' of that water onto the person. Tellingly, it can also involve rubbing the sweat of people who belong to that place onto the newcomer. This provides a very clear demonstration of the belief that the water of the country and the water emerging from the people who belong there are co-identified as the same substance.

Many ancestral stories provide warnings about the dangers of failing to accommodate these beliefs. For example, in the 'cheeky' Rainbow Story mentioned previously, where the young man is taken while fishing in the lagoon, it is because he failed to make himself known to the ancestral forces:

Yes, he was finish a bora [had just finished an initiation ceremony] and then come here fishing. He shouldn't have come. Nobody bin put a smell around him [no-one baptised him], nothing. (Lefty Yam)

Part of the purpose of this sentient presence is to ensure that the country is properly cared for and that the rituals and avoidances associated with its powerful poison places are observed. The Ancestral Law provides a clear moral demand that the land should be kept 'clean' (i.e. burned regularly to remove

'rubbish' growth), and that sacred places should remain undisturbed. In effect, therefore, it is a metaphorical discourse about control: the land must only be occupied and cared for by the clans who have an ancestral right to do this and who are constituted by – and identified with – the waters of that landscape. This sphere of control is not confined to land and freshwater sources, but also extends outwards, over the seascapes with which coastal groups are identified.¹⁶

Politics and Pollution

It was of course water which brought the invaders who dispossessed the indigenous inhabitants of their land. They came first by sea in the late 1600s, explored the Gulf of Carpentaria coast and left, rebuffed by the inhospitable land and its people. Later though, in the 1800s when the east coast had been settled, the overland explorers also came by water, picking their way along the rivers – the Palmer, the Mitchell and the Alice – which wind across the peninsula. They were swiftly followed by pastoralists, who spread westwards to provide beef for the miners searching for gold and tin at the river headwaters. They settled on the land, often appropriating for their homesteads and yards the major waterholes and key sacred sites of the local clans.

Many such places are now marked by this history: in 1859 at the junction of the Alice and Mitchell Rivers the Jardine brothers shot 30 Aboriginal people as they huddled in the water having expended all their spears in

trying to stop the horsemen (Sharp 1937, 1952).¹⁷ The Kunjen elders also describe how in 'grandfathers' time' at Emu Lagoon, where the ancestral Emu had fallen from the sky leaving a creek in the shape of an emu, a massacre took place when someone speared a settler's horse: only a baby was left, still clinging to its mother's breast. Similarly, all members of the community are familiar with the account of how, near the Rutland Plains station homestead in 1910, some men were killed when they were caught outside the haven of the reserve fishing in a lagoon (see Alpher 1966, 1988, Strang 1997, in press b).

For a long time afterwards local clans could only maintain their use of these places covertly. The violence and dispossession that they experienced was followed by decades of repression within mission life or working on the cattle stations. The latter choice at least allowed clans to remain near their own land, but in the 1960s, when it became law to pay all stockworkers, these groups were also pushed into the mission reserve. In the latter half of the 20th century contact with

¹⁵ Floods in particular are seen as a response to the disturbance of the Rainbow snake, and this belief is echoed in many parts of Australia (eg. Rose 1986, 1992).

¹⁶ Coastal Aboriginal groups usually have story tracks which extend out to sea, and the battle to regain 'sea rights' is now part of the more familiar land rights conflict in Australia.

¹⁷ The site of this massacre, like all rivers in this savannah country, is surrounded by a dense ribbon of trees, which begs the question as to why the Aboriginal people took refuge in the more exposed river. As this site is near a very powerful story place – a large serpent is said to lurk in a cave beneath the water – it is possible that the local clan sought the protection of the water in the hope that the ancestral forces would defend them against the invaders.

secret rituals which manifest ancestral power and maintain the wellbeing of the land.

Water is vital to this process: the Rainbow Serpent, as well as generating people and resources, is a *fons sapientiae* – a fountainhead of wisdom. To acquire secret knowledge and become a ‘doctor’ (witchdoctor or shaman), a person has to ‘pass through the Rainbow’. According to informants in Kowanyama ‘passing through the Rainbow’ means being swallowed by the Rainbow Serpent/Cyclone. Similar beliefs are expressed in other groups, for example elders in the neighbouring community of Pompokuraaw described a ritual in which:

A would-be *wangath* [doctor] went off to one of the lagoons that the mythic creature was known to haunt, and, after rubbing himself over with native honey and sweet fruit, began swimming in the water. Attracted by the smell of the honey and the fruit the Rainbow Serpent/Cyclone would swim up and swallow the neophyte whole. It would then swim off to another place carrying the neophyte in its stomach. Ghosts of the neophyte's ancestors, especially the poison grandfathers, *kaman*, would sing out to the creature warning it not to keep their kinsman too long in its stomach. Later the man would be regurgitated on the bank of a lagoon. As he lay there recovering from the experience, red ants would come and clean the new doctor of the

coating he had acquired in the belly of the creature. (Taylor 1984:245)

This ritual, like all such knowledge, is described in the Law and often referred to metaphorically. This is nicely illustrated in the Rainbow Story (*Ewarr*) mentioned earlier, a detailed account of which was given to me in 2000 by a senior Kunjen elder, Lefty Yam.¹⁴

As the Rainbow Snake is tearing through the land making a river, the noise is overheard by another ancestral being, a small bird called *Inh Elar* a ‘night pigeon’ [nightjar or owlet], who follows the track, and then circles round with a spear to intercept the Rainbow.

He follow from way down there, right from [river] junction... He seen him coming across this way. ‘Hey! What’s this track here?’ He look, the root and all, he pulled ‘em out. ‘Wonder what this’... All the way follow him track... That little pigeon, night pigeon, he go round.. He wait here, right here with a spear... He had a good spear too. ‘I’ll try spearing him, spearing him.’ He spear him right here ...[through the chest]. Spear him here [at Rainbow Story Place]...

The Rainbow snake was very long and coiled up right around him to smother him. *Inh Elar* couldn’t get out.

‘Ooooh!’ He’s coil up now; for they long eh, Rainbow, he long. Chuck that coil riiight over him, cover him, all that coil – gone. He couldn’t get away – tried to run away. No, he couldn’t go that way, no. ‘Which way I gonna come out? This way?’ He go this way – no. He [Rainbow] all round him, you know... He coming close la him [constricting]. ‘Oh!’ He going swallow him, you know, he going swallow him you see. He look around...

Inh Elar speared the Rainbow through a mark on his chest, making a hole right through him out of which he escapes. By doing so, he passes through the Rainbow and becomes a ‘clever doctor’.

Yeah! That boy bin spear him, that mark, cut here with a spear. He get in that hole see... bin get in that same mark, get in, come out other side, gone! He [Rainbow] coil up, no, nothing – he over there! That’s why him today, he clever doctor now, Inh Elar. Yeah, witchdoctor.

Aboriginal stories are full of similar events, in which people are swallowed and regurgitated and thus transformed (see Hiatt 1984, Charlesworth *et al* 1984, Radcliffe-Brown 1930, Eliade 1958). As a metaphor of death and rebirth these can depict various

life stages – a transition into adulthood or an attainment of seniority – but each is characterised by the loss of one identity and the acquisition of another, and by the shift into a deeper level of knowledge. In the end, of course, people are reidentified with the Rainbow, losing the persona of their life cycle and ‘coming back to their home’.

Water Power

Aboriginal cosmology defines the landscape as a sentient place, inhabited by many kinds of beings who watch human activities closely. Alongside the Rainbow snakes and water fairies that inhabit water places there are ghosts and devils. The landscape itself can express grief at the loss of a person belonging to that place. For example, a large and normally reliable waterhole, Emu Lagoon, is said to dry up only ‘when the father of that country dies’. As well as offering resources to those who belong, the country and its waterholes can also withhold them from those who don’t. As one elder put it:

When people go to a place where those old people [ancestors] used to be in that home, before we catch anything we have to call out to them, to give us some food, you know, and fish or turtle to catch, and then people start catching something. If you’re a stranger and go fishing, you catch nothing, because you don’t know how to talk to them, and they don’t know you. (Alma Wason)

¹⁴ Lefty Yam has an informal role as the primary ‘storyteller’ for the Kunjen clans in Kowanyama: most of the other elders defer to his detailed recollections of stories, and I have recorded many of these on behalf of the Kunjen groups and for my own research in the last decade.

their ancestral places became somewhat easier as control of the community shifted first from Church to State and then gradually into the hands of a local Aboriginal Council. However, the traditional land of many of the clans in Kowanyama was a long way from the reserve/DOGIT area. Much of it remained in the hands of European pastoralists and the national parks department, and even the DOGIT land and resources were not immune from other kinds of invasion as the Cape York Peninsula developed rapidly and other forms of industry, such as mining, fishing and tourism, made their presence felt.

In the late 1980s the commercial fishing industry in the Gulf of Carpentaria was burgeoning, and the community found very quickly that their claim to the coastal waters – where the estuaries are a primary source of fish and other species – was poorly respected. The incoming fishing boats used huge nets which scooped up every type of fish and, as only a few profitable species were of interest to the crews, they discarded many if not most of this catch. Local Aboriginal clans were outraged to find piles of dead fish on their beaches, fish which they themselves regarded as a key resource.

We worried about the fishermen. Fishermen, see they come in... put nets in the rivers, and take out all the fish from the creek, rivers, and just dump... We see, 'oh them fish are dead' – wrong thing for us... Where they drag their net, all sorts of fish get caught in it you know, and they take the fish

what they want – don't worry about the rest of the fish, and we see them fish were wasted, that upset us. Because every fish, we eat it, that fish, we eat it. We don't waste it... that our food they bin caught up... And then we turn round and we can't get that fish we bin looking for... in the early days my people used to look after the rivers because they knew where to get that good fish... that's the sort of thing that we worry about. (Colin Lawrence)

There were also growing concerns about the way in which other ancestral places were being disturbed by developments. Most of the concern, predictably, focused on water places which had been compromised by European activities such as the building of dams, roads and cattle yards. People also became increasingly worried about the effects of feral animals such as pigs, and the overuse of water sources for cattle. As is common in many parts of Australia the drilling of numerous bores to access artesian water is creating problems, particularly in areas where water is also drawn for irrigation.¹⁸

Because water is the substance through which Aboriginal people are most intimately identified with the land, injury to a water source or the poisoning of the water is deeply felt. It is understandable then, that

¹⁸ The overuse of artesian wells, which lowers the water table and puts water loaded with minerals and salts directly onto the topsoils, has led to a widespread salination problem which is poisoning vast areas of land in Australia.

water sources are most often the focus of concern in dialogues with other land users. As will be apparent from the preceding ethnography, in an Aboriginal cosmos nothing could be worse than the poisoning or pollution of the underground water sources which represent the invisible dimension of ancestral creativity and power. But of course ancestral forces are flowing continuously between this dimension and the visible plane of existence, and surface water pollution is obviously another major concern. This is particularly the case when pollution flows in uncontrollably from outside the land held by the community.

Just as the seas and rivers brought the invaders, they have also brought other forms of pollution of the Aboriginal landscape. For the last few decades there has been a massive increase in the infestations of waterborne weeds. These are usually non-indigenous species brought in by Europeans to beautify their gardens, which have then seeded and found their way down the rivers to thrive in the Gulf savannah country. For example, rubber vine, a decorative plant from Malaya, is now eating up huge tracts of land in the area, filling it with impenetrable patches of cable-like vine which is almost impossible to destroy. Water hyacinths now clog many waterholes and creeks. Non-indigenous fish, introduced upriver to provide sport, are finding their way downstream to impinge upon local species. There has also been an increase in turbidity in the waters of many rivers and creeks, because of developments upstream,

and the other major anxiety expressed by the elders in Kowanyama is that the chemicals such as cyanide used in the mines which cluster round the headwaters (see Trigger 1998, Strang in 2001d).¹⁹ Many old and abandoned mine sites, built long before environmental legislation was brought in, are leaching chemicals into the land and thus the watercourses.

They can really muck em up the river... I seen it, I've seen that big mine, looked at it... Mine use too much water, muck up that water too. That's what we worry about, we worry about that thing. Up this end here, you know, because we know we got a big river, comes up this way, and we worry about that thing... We want to keep that river clean for the future generations. (Colin Lawrence)

'Clean' in Aboriginal English means 'orderly' – in other words, 'having a proper order'.²⁰ It is therefore a classic example of a cultural concept of order which, as Douglas (1975) made clear, is vulnerable to the disturbance of 'pollution'. In Aboriginal terms 'a proper order' means a properly inhabited landscape

¹⁹ These concerns have been echoed by many Aboriginal groups in Australia; for example, Trigger (1998) notes the anxieties of other Gulf country groups about the pollution of rivers and saltwaters by zinc mining: 'Aboriginal worries about environmental impacts have been expressed constantly' (1998:161)

²⁰ People also talk about keeping the country 'clean' and this refers to the traditional practice of burning off the undergrowth on a regular basis, making the land accessible and ensuring new grass ('green pick') for game.

in which Ancestral Law and the ancestral forces still hold sway, organising people and land, locating identity in place, and regenerating people and resources. In ideological terms this is a highly conservative and implicitly unchanging cosmos, based on circular temporality and the 'reliving' of ancestral lives, but as Morphy (1988, 1990) and others have made clear, this is merely an ideal model. In reality Aboriginal cosmology has considerable flexibility, and has readily encompassed the expansion and contraction of populations, technological and social developments, and ecological changes, such as rising sea levels.²¹ However, the principles of order within this more dynamic reality are predicated upon the ability of Aboriginal people to maintain control of the land and manage it appropriately, in accord with customary beliefs and values. As I noted in an analysis of the impact of mining on Kowanyama:

The pollution of their water sources is a potent metaphor for the continuing colonisation of their land, the disturbance of their social and economic forms, and the 'cultural pollution' of their beliefs, values and identity. (2001d:209)

Making Waves

Despite the appropriation of their land and the subsequent influx of people, dominant political and economic modes, western beliefs and values, and material culture, the Aboriginal groups in Kowanyama have maintained their own concepts of order and

a conviction that the best way to cope with the changing context in which they find themselves is to hold on to its fundamental tenets. In doing so they hope to gain greater political self-determination, social stability and some economic self-sufficiency. On achieving a degree of self-government in the 1980s one of the first things the new Council did to enable its management of the community and the reserve area was to set up a Land Management Office, and one of the first battles embarked upon by this office was the protection of water resources. Lengthy negotiations with the fishing industry resulted in better protection for the estuaries and the appointment of Aboriginal Rangers to discourage illegal fishing.

The casual appropriation of their most vital estuarine resources and their other concerns about developments and damage to ancestral sites and other important resources also led Kowanyama, in the early 1990s, to initiate a dialogue with other land and water users in the area by setting up the Mitchell River Watershed Management Group (MRWVG²²) (see Sinnamon 1992, Strang 2001b). This involved the fishing industry, miners, pastoralists, tourism operators, the national parks department and various conservation organisations. Though

²¹ Accounts of the rise in sea levels which created the Gulf of Carpentaria and the Torres Straits appear in a number of ancestral 'myths' in northern Australia, including several in Kowanyama.

²² This was originally called the Mitchell River Watershed Catchment Management Group, but has undergone a simplification in title.

established ostensibly to discuss environmental problems of common concern, its purpose was also to create a forum in which the people in Kowanyama could conduct negotiations with other groups and build more positive and equal relationships with them than had been achieved in the past. The community hoped to encourage them to recognise Aboriginal use of the land, and to acknowledge the value of indigenous land management. In this way, it was felt, other groups would be less inclined to ride roughshod over their concerns and ignore their interests.

One of the priorities in the early meetings of the river catchment group was for members of the community to make public protests about one of their major concerns, the damage to ancestral sites. An important story place near Kowanyama, Red Lily Lagoon, had been severely damaged by these kinds of developments. Under Ancestral Law the disturbance of an important story place has major ramifications for the people most closely attached to it who, it is believed, will become sick or even die as a result. This is not merely a concern that the ancestral forces will be enraged by such action, or that people will suffer, but also about the lack of acknowledgement of Aboriginal interests in the land and of Aboriginal managerial responsibilities for that site. This cavalier action was therefore seen as an erasure of Aboriginal identification with the land. As one Kunjen elder said bluntly at a meeting:

That lagoon why he bin buggered up? Because that lagoon, at Red Lily, that's a Story Place. You know you people must understand, like the Government must understand, what they got to do, to us. Because Aboriginal people, we got Story Place, and a lagoon like that one bin really buggered up because they bin pushed, they make dam there, push 'im, make block there in the bottom end and they buggered up the whole thing up.... Bloody people never ask us, never come and ask people in the community and say 'Can we put dam in?'... They just went on and do it! (Colin Lawrence)

More recently the community has raised concerns at meetings of the watershed group about some plans to divert water from the headwaters of the Mitchell to provide more resources for the growing population in Cairns. The MRWVG has therefore continued to provide a way for people in Kowanyama to express their concern about the water in their environment being either appropriated or compromised.

A major part of the process of negotiation has been to educate the other inhabitants of the river catchment area about indigenous relations with land. This centres on enabling people to understand the core beliefs and values of Aboriginal culture. Because economic ownership is so controversial and difficult to discuss, Aboriginal groups have found it more productive to emphasise the spiritual meanings of their cultural

landscape.²³ Representations – stories, songs and performances – are thus more focused on Ancestral places and their ritual requirements, but of course the social and economic subtext is never absent since, in Aboriginal terms, it is part and parcel of the Law. Because water is a ‘substantial’ part of ancestral creativity its cultural meanings feature strongly in these representations.

The many streams of meaning encoded in water also come into play in ritual demonstrations of Aboriginal land ownership. A good example of the way in which this battle is conducted at an implicit level is the common practice of baptising outsiders who visit Aboriginal land for meetings with the community. This now occurs at almost every meeting outside the settlement (see Strang in press a). These invariably take place at waterholes or river sites, partly for practical reasons and of course because these are where the ancestral forces are most potent. The elders of that country formally welcome visitors to the site, and baptise them, pouring water from the place over their heads. This achieves several vital outcomes: it makes it clear that the visitors are precisely that – outsiders to this Aboriginal landscape, there under the protection of the traditional owners. It makes a clear statement about the sentience of that country and the power of the ancestral forces to protect both the country and its inhabitants. Most of all it states very clearly that the Aboriginal people there are of the same substance as that land and belong there as of right, and it provides

an opportunity to begin educating the visitors about Aboriginal culture and the meanings of water and water places within the Law. At the same time, by borrowing the English word for ‘baptism’ and linking the local practice with a – not entirely dissimilar – Christian concept of being introduced into a group defined by spiritual identity, the ceremony also suggests the potential for a social relationship between the indigenous people and the newcomers, but one that is properly established according to Aboriginal tenets and under Aboriginal control.

The meanings of water are also represented in many other contexts: in ceremonies and everyday activities within the community, and in all forms of contact with the range of non-Aboriginal groups who visit Kowanyama for one reason or another. Similar educative efforts are made when Aboriginal groups become involved in land claims. The legislation enabling this process²⁴ has gradually encompassed some of the basic principles of Aboriginal Law and clan land ownership. Thus in land claim tribunals Aboriginal witnesses describe their ancestral relations to place and the rights which this provides to them and, in doing so, continue

²³ Because European Australians generally compartmentalise religion and economic rights, this has not always been recognised as a direct challenge to European economic and legal control of the land, but in Ancestral Law, of course, it is a very direct challenge indeed.

²⁴ There is a range of legislation pertinent to land, but the most relevant is the Land Acts which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s and the Native Title legislation which followed the Mabo case in 1993 (see Strang 1997, 2000).



Baptism of the author by Alma Watson, with Kunjen (Nelson) Luke

to construct and represent an identity which is founded upon these precepts.

In a wider social context, where the indigenous population is a tiny and heavily disadvantaged minority of less than 2%, the representational process which foregrounds Aboriginal belonging ‘in place’ is central to pan-Aboriginal efforts to create a sense of identity which both preserves long-held beliefs and values and adapts to new pressures. Framing ancient relations to land in a modern context is a difficult challenge, defining difference in a way which can have either positive or negative effects. Some people are ambivalent about this ‘back to basics’ focus,

but as the Aboriginal artist Gordon Bennett comments, traditional modes of constructing identity are strategic and functional, offering ‘something solid to cling onto, a kind of life raft’ in resisting the pressure of external visions of Aboriginality (1996:28)

Morris (1989) has drawn attention to the way in which the politics of identity for Aboriginal people are focused on creating their own world of meaning under the critical gaze and constant intervention of those with superior power (see also Attwood and Arnold 1992). Kapferer notes that this is an essential part of maintaining a choice about identity:

The discourses over identity in Australia... are vital in the construction and constitution of identity itself. Discourses surrounding identity in Australia concretise what they construct. They create communities in fact whose social and political reality is forged through the imagination and style of the discourse itself... It is particularly so in the discourse concerning identity among Aboriginal groups. Here the discursive practice generates communities of identity and authenticates their presence. It is integral to their 'registration' within the bureaucratic order of the state. (1995:69, 70)

For indigenous people in Australia, and certainly for those in Kowanyama, the Law and its capacity to regenerate Aboriginal being remains integral to their concepts of what composes Aboriginality. In Kowanyama's engagement with the native title process and in its local negotiations with other groups in the river catchment, the community's self-representations remain rooted in the land and in the waters which bring life to this physical and cultural landscape. In this sense water and all the meanings that it carries play a vital role in sustaining modern Aboriginal groups in their efforts to reproduce their own cultural being. It is the primary metaphor and as Layton (1997:125) has commented, faces both inwards and outwards, carrying, on the one hand intergenerational transmission of

knowledge and, on the other, political negotiation with the dominant society.

In this way protests about pollution and water are a metaphor for a discourse which is more difficult to make explicit – a debate about the extent to which Aboriginal culture, based on its core precepts, can resist the dominance of European culture and values. In some respects this resonates with popular discourse in which, as Povinelli points out, people are still debating whether Aboriginal culture has some kind of autochthonous 'authenticity' or whether this has been 'washed away' in the 'tides of history' (1999:21).

Conclusion

Water is the creative substance from which the ancestral beings emerged and in which they remain. The Dreaming cycle from one dimension to another is reflected in the hydrological cycles between earth and sky and in the way that water shapes the land and enlivens everything in it. Human spiritual emergence from and re-entry into the Dreaming echoes this process and is similarly conceptualised as a continual cycle of regeneration. Both physically and metaphorically the water 'homes' from which individuals emerge are the essence of their identity, and the water in their bodies links them to their kin and to the environment they inhabit.

All of the reproductive cycles of life and death are carried by the rainbows of water which arc from the sky to an implicit

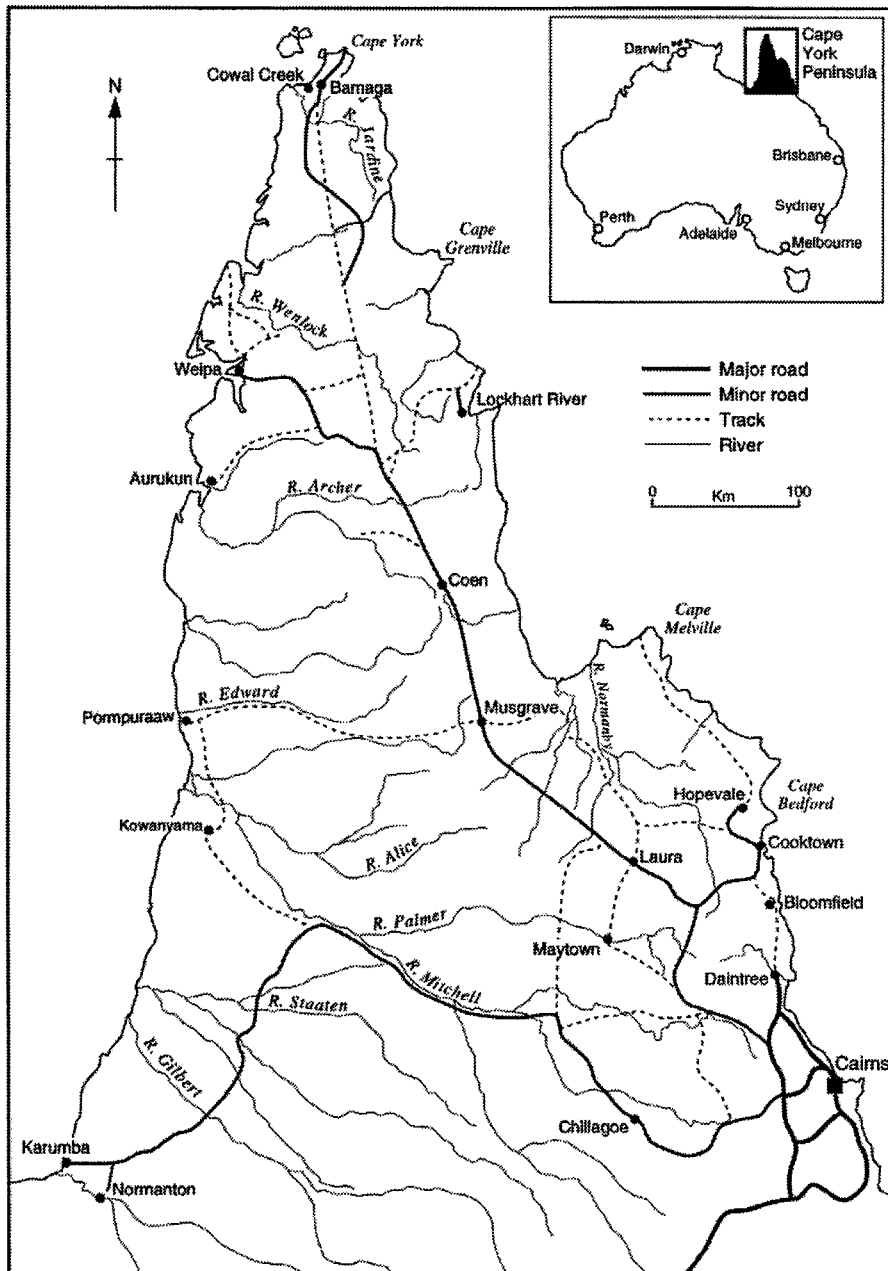
completion of the circle imagined in Rainbow Serpents under the land. On the 'visible' horizontal plane of the landscape the movements of people between groups and across the land is allied with the swirling currents of the rivers and creeks that flow over the surface, ensuring that water places, rivers and creeks articulate with socio-spatial organisation and the distribution of resources. Aboriginal culture is enacted upon the land, and the knowledge from which it is composed is deemed to be contained in the land and in the waters of the Rainbow.

This is an extraordinarily coherent cosmology: like a series of mirrors, every part of it reflects the forms and patterns of movement discernible in the others. As Morphy has made clear (1991:167–169) this is entirely typical of Aboriginal representational forms, which are multi-valent in employing particular images to signify conceptually related meanings at different levels. This congruence – or confluence – is particularly evident in the ways in which water is used to provide meaning. As the case study makes clear, it flows throughout the Law, carrying with it all of the components of being and Aboriginal culture itself.

The ethnographic evidence therefore elucidates the interaction between Aboriginal cosmology and people's experiences and understandings of their material environment and its processes. The observable characteristics of water and the ecological cycles to which it is central are

unchanging, so the use of these as model and metaphor in an Aboriginal cosmos provides intellectual coherence between immediate material experience and conceptual schema, providing cultural continuity and resilience to indigenous beliefs and values.

Such 'grounded' cosmological holism offers a sharp contrast to the fast changing abstractions of non-Aboriginal culture in Australia, with its multi-cultural smorgasbord of beliefs and values and its numerous explanatory narratives. In engaging with this and with the larger and dominant society, indigenous Australians find that their more coherent traditional Law and its continuities is a 'substantial' source of strength in resisting the many pressures that this interaction entails. It is only by protecting the Law, as well as invoking its protection, that Aboriginal people can preserve their sense of self. Calling upon and representing the ancestral forces, and so manifesting the potency of the sacred wells and 'poison places', is a way of marshalling the strength of Aboriginal people to maintain their own cultural landscape and to achieve Aboriginal autonomy and greater control of the land. In this sense the Rainbow continues to be a source of power: curved into the very foundations of the earth, pouring life into the landscape, it is a fierce protective force which regenerates and sustains Aboriginal life Down Under.



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