Land is Life:
Continuity through change
for the Yanyuwa from the
Northern Territory of Australia

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Abstract

Geographers and historians in Australia have created and perpetuated the misconception that Aboriginal people “withered away” when they came into contact with Europeans. This thesis illustrates how a cultural geographic study using as a framework Sauer’s concept of the cultural landscape can highlight the inaccuracy of conventional views of the contact process.

The interactive nature of contact is stressed and examples of how both Europeans and Aboriginal people influenced each other are drawn out. The issue of how Aboriginal people made the move from bush life to town based life is examined in detail. By moving beyond the usual approach of asking why Aboriginal people moved in, to examining how they moved in, a fuller understanding of this process is established.

In so doing, I highlight the important point that in many cases, initially at least, Aboriginal people did not move into European settlements, but in fact the reverse process occurred. I illustrate how many Europeans moved to the very same locations that had previously been foci for Aboriginal people. Subsequently, and to varying degrees, these Europeans were incorporated into Aboriginal social systems.

The gradual process whereby Aboriginal people came to spend longer periods of each year at these locations is examined. At such places Aboriginal people supplied labour for a variety of European economic activities and in exchange received various European goods. Aboriginal reliance on these goods and the related decline in traditional economic activity led to a growing Aboriginal dependency on European society. The concept of dependency is examined and its role in preventing Aboriginal people from leaving European settlements is highlighted.

The value of considering indigenous notions of history and geography is demonstrated. An understanding of how Aboriginal people classify periods of their past and perceive their environment are fundamental issues in the study of culture contact. To study Aboriginal views of the past and their land it is essential to use oral sources. The methodological issues that arise from using such sources are examined and this study itself provides an example of how such sources can be successfully incorporated into geography. A major issue that is addressed is how different individuals see the environment and history differently. The process by which different group views are
formed is examined.

By focusing very specifically on the contact experience of one Aboriginal group it is illustrated how specific local features shaped the contact experience of each separate area. However, at the same time general processes of wider relevance are also revealed.

The empirical contribution of the work should not be overlooked. In documenting a view of past processes that was in danger of being lost forever, a major contribution to knowledge has been made.
Contents

I Method and Theory 16

1 Introduction 17

1.1 Aim ................................................. 17
1.2 Focus .............................................. 19
1.3 Contemporary Yanyuwa life ......................... 27
1.4 Thesis structure .................................. 33

2 Methodology 34

2.1 Introduction ...................................... 34
2.2 Terminology and conventions used ............... 36
2.3 Assessing written records ......................... 39
2.4 Fieldwork ........................................... 42

2.4.1 Introduction .................................... 42
2.4.2 First informants ................................ 49
2.4.3 The extension to the community ............... 47

2.4.4 Tape recording .................................. 50
2.4.5 Use of photographs ............................. 53

2.5 Yanyuwa support for my research ................ 54

3 Oral Sources 56

3.1 Introduction ....................................... 56

3.2 Methodological issues raised by oral history ........

3.2.1 Criticism of oral history ...................... 57
3.2.2 History of dominant and marginal groups ....... 58

3.2.3 Problems caused by creating data .............. 58
CONTENTS

3.2.4 The art of asking ................................................. 60
3.2.5 The structure of memory ..................................... 62
3.3 Practical issues raised by the use of oral sources ............ 63
  3.3.1 Learning on the job ........................................ 63
  3.3.2 The generation and maintenance of stories ............... 66
  3.3.3 Truth, perception and views of the past .................. 68
  3.3.4 Aboriginal story telling ................................... 73
  3.3.5 Significance of land ........................................ 75
  3.3.6 Group dynamics ............................................. 77
  3.3.7 Individual and collective views of the past ............... 78

4 Theory ................................................................. 81
  4.1 Geography: the central focus ................................ 81
    4.1.1 Historical geography ...................................... 84
  4.2 Related disciplines ............................................ 86
    4.2.1 Anthropology ............................................... 86
    4.2.2 Prehistory .................................................. 89
    4.2.3 History ..................................................... 92
    4.2.4 Links between geography and these disciplines ......... 97
  4.3 Models of Culture Contact .................................... 98
    4.3.1 The frontier school and indigenous history .............. 100
    4.3.2 The frontier school and geography ....................... 101
    4.3.3 The frontier school and Australian history ........... 103
  4.4 Dependence ..................................................... 107

II Physical and Cultural Landscape .................................. 114

5 Environment .......................................................... 115
  5.1 Introduction .................................................. 115
  5.2 Tropical climate ............................................... 116
  5.3 Significance of location ...................................... 120
    5.3.1 Introduction ............................................... 120
    5.3.2 Limited road access ...................................... 120
CONTENTS

5.3.3 Social isolation ............................................. 124
5.4 Yanyuwa concepts of land units ................................. 127
5.5 Environmental change ......................................... 133
5.6 Conclusion ...................................................... 136

6 Cultural Landscape .............................................. 138
6.1 Introduction ..................................................... 138
6.2 Definition of the cultural landscape ............................. 141
6.3 The Macassan influenced cultural landscape ....................... 144
6.3.1 Macassan contact ............................................ 144
6.4 The European influenced cultural landscape ....................... 152
6.4.1 European contact ............................................ 153
6.5 The dynamic cultural landscape ................................ 160
6.5.1 Language ..................................................... 160
6.5.2 Land use ..................................................... 161
6.5.3 Population ................................................... 169
6.5.4 Contact with other Aboriginal groups ........................ 173
6.5.5 Material culture ............................................. 176
6.5.6 Territorial organisation ..................................... 180
6.5.7 Perceptions of country ..................................... 183
6.6 Changing cultural landscapes: other Aboriginal groups .......... 187
6.7 The role of the cultural landscape in history ..................... 191

III Description of Contact .......................................... 194

7 Phases of Yanyuwa-European Contact .............................. 195
7.1 Introduction ..................................................... 195
7.2 European trepangers: Macassan times continued ................. 197
7.3 'Wild times' .................................................... 200
7.3.1 Introduction ................................................... 200
7.3.2 Shoot their own colour ...................................... 203
7.3.3 Jail .......................................................... 203
7.3.4 Borrooloola: a wild west town ................................ 205
### Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.3.5</td>
<td>Aboriginal responses: cattle killings</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3.6</td>
<td>Other Aboriginal responses</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3.7</td>
<td>An island haven?</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>‘War time’</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>‘Police times’</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>‘Welfare times’</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.6.1</td>
<td>Dangara</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.6.2</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>‘Cattle times’</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.7.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.7.2</td>
<td>The seasonal round of cattle work</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.7.3</td>
<td>The good old days?</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.7.4</td>
<td>Role of Aboriginal women in the cattle industry</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.7.5</td>
<td>The scars of the cattle times</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.7.6</td>
<td>End of the ‘cattle times’</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>‘Land rights (Gough Whitlam) times’</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.8.1</td>
<td>Outstations</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>‘This (tourist) time’</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.10</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### IV Analysis of Contact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>‘Coining In’</td>
<td>268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>Why did people come in?</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2.1</td>
<td>Tobacco</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>The Yanywa view of ‘coming in’</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3.2</td>
<td>Was it welfare?</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3.3</td>
<td>Coming in to Dommadgee</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3.4</td>
<td>“Been rounded up”</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>How did people ‘come in’?</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## CONTENTS

8.1.1 An individual example: Tim Rakuwurlma .................................. 287
8.4.2 Coming and going ............................................................... 290
8.4.3 Alignment ........................................................................... 293
8.4.4 ‘Big places’ ........................................................................... 294
8.4.5 Maningoora ........................................................................... 299
8.4.6 Malanndarri camp ................................................................. 311
8.5 Why did people stay in town? ....................................................... 319
8.6 Conclusion .............................................................................. 323

9 Results of ‘Coming In’ ................................................................. 325
  9.1 Dislocation ................................................................. 325
  9.1.1 European legal system ....................................................... 326
  9.1.2 European welfare system ................................................... 328
  9.1.3 European medical system ................................................... 331
  9.1.4 Employment ..................................................................... 332
  9.2 Changing marriage patterns .................................................... 335
  9.3 Sexual harassment of Aboriginal women ................................... 343
  9.4 Changes in camp structures .................................................... 345
  9.5 Changes in health ................................................................. 348
  9.6 Employment with Europeans .................................................. 351
  9.7 Christianity ......................................................................... 355
  9.8 School ............................................................................... 361
  9.9 Aboriginal influences on Europeans ......................................... 363
  9.10 Conclusion .......................................................................... 372

V Conclusions ............................................................................. 374

10 Different Ways of Seeing the Yanyuwa Past .................................... 375
  10.1 Aboriginal - European .......................................................... 375
  10.1.1 History .......................................................................... 375
  10.1.2 Environment .................................................................... 383
  10.2 A ceremonial view of the past ............................................... 385
  10.3 A cattle view of the past ....................................................... 387
10.4 Male and female views ........................................ 392
10.5 A 'summing up' view of the past ........................... 394
10.6 Different views due to age and status .................... 395
10.7 Individual and collective views .............................. 397
10.8 Conclusion ..................................................... 398

11 Conclusion ....................................................... 399
11.1 Methodological contribution ................................ 399
11.2 Continuity in change ......................................... 401
11.3 From the unique to the universal ........................... 404
11.4 The past in the present, the present in the past .......... 409
11.5 The future? .................................................... 410

12 Bibliography ....................................................... 412

VI Appendixes ......................................................... 456
A Glossary ............................................................. 451
B Historical Photographs Relating to Borroloola ............ 453
C Population Estimates ............................................. 456
D Bush Tucker ........................................................ 459
E History of Oral History ......................................... 465
F Aboriginal Cattle Killing Techniques ........................ 467
G Question Prompt and Recording Sheet ....................... 471
H Information Stored by DBASE III Program .................. 474
I Biographical Details of Those Interviewed .................. 478
J Date and Place that Tapes were Recorded ................. 498