Contact, Conflict and Regeneration:

Aboriginal Cultural Geography of the

Lower Murray, South Australia

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March 1994

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Departments of Geography and Anthropology, University of Adelaide.
Abstract

Geographers and anthropologists in Australia have generally not recognised that Aboriginal groups in southern Australia have retained and developed a distinctive view of the landscape they occupy. This is because of a reluctance to consider that modern cultural forms have 'traditions'. This large region has experienced the most intense pressures of European settlement. The interaction between the Aboriginal population and the dominant non-Aboriginal powers has been long and its impact far-reaching. Increasingly, Aboriginal people are living in landscapes modified by rural and urban development. In spite of this, there is a lack of literature concerning the relationships these people have with the land and places of significance within it. This thesis, as an exercise in cultural geography, aims to fill this gap. It is my broad aim to develop an understanding of how a contemporary Aboriginal group, living in close proximity to non-Aboriginal people, can maintain and develop a distinct pattern of occupancy and use of space. I explore place as a phenomenon of everyday experiences which Aboriginal people have with the geography of the lived-world. To achieve this, I develop a view of culture that portrays contemporary Aboriginal groups as a modern product of continuous re-construction rather than as a pre-European relic. I argue that culture is continuously reinvented. The link between changes in the landscape and that of the culture of its inhabitants are investigated.

My study group is the Ngarrindjeri Aboriginal community of the Lower Murray region of South Australia (Fig.1.1). I provide an empirical record of the process of transformation of this group and its cultural landscape from the immediate pre-colonial period to the present. Ngarrindjeri perceptions of the land and particular places within it are accounted for with respect to change in the landscape and within their culture. I demonstrate that the interaction of contemporary Aboriginal people with the land cannot be understood without reference to their past and present relationships to the hegemony of the dominant Australian culture. The concept of cultural landscape is used in conjunction with notions of place, with the inclusion of models of culture derived from anthropology and sociology. Using perceptual insights derived from the culture group itself, I seek to extend the concept of cultural landscape to incorporate not only the objective results of human transformation, but the unique subjective meanings attached to it. I explore the role of place in shaping identity, and provide a critique of classical anthropological definitions of cultural groups such as 'tribes' within the landscape.
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