ABORIGINAL ASPIRATIONS FOR HERITAGE CONSERVATION

John Ah Kit

A couple of years ago the Northern Territory Government, in their wisdom, decided to name a vacant area of land on the corner of Bagot and Totem Roads in Darwin after the Queen Mother.

The naming of a park in Darwin after an elderly member of the British royal family must have been a puzzle to most Territorians, but to many Aboriginal people in Darwin it was deeply offensive. And it was offensive not just because the park was to be named for a member of the ruling family that dispossessed our people 205 years ago, but because the site selected by the Government has important historical associations for many Aboriginal families in Darwin.

The result was that around a week after the Government announcement about 40 Aboriginal people carried out a dawn raid on the park, and erected a sign proclaiming that the park was to be re-named Karu Park.

The site of Karu Park was the location for many years of the Retta Dixon Home, a church run home for Aboriginal kids, many of whom were stolen from their Aboriginal mothers under a government policy which separated so-called 'half-caste' children from their families so as to assimilate them into white society. Taken from their bush homes, the Aboriginal kids who went to Retta Dixon grew up apart from their families in a strange and alien environment.

Today all that physically remains of the tragic days of Retta Dixon are concrete foundations of buildings, old driveways and mango trees. Nevertheless, the experiences of those of our people who went through Retta Dixon continue to shape today's Aboriginal community.

The story of the Retta Dixon Home is not a particularly pleasant one, but is an important part of Aboriginal heritage in the Top End. Therefore, it was far more appropriate for the old Retta Dixon site to be named 'Karu' - Gurindji word meaning 'child' - than after the Queen Mother.

But the fact that the name of distant royalty was seen as being more worthy of honour than that of Aboriginal history indicates that something is seriously wrong with the way that the powers-that-be interpret and commemorate history. It is as if the only 'real' history worth remembering is that of Britain and its colonisers, while the history of indigenous Australians is seen as being not really history at all. As far as much of the heritage industry goes, Australian history is still seen as terra nullius before the arrival of Captain Cook, followed by a couple of hundred years of colonial architecture and nation building by squatters and gold miners.

That is not entirely true, of course. At least at the level of the tourist industry and the way it 'sells' itself to interstate and overseas visitors, Aboriginal heritage is very much a marketable commodity. There would hardly be a single brochure from the Top End, for example, that does not have Aboriginal rock art or a similar theme incorporated in its design.

The point is, though, that Aboriginal heritage such as rock art is something that is 'safe' in marketing terms. It is seen as mysterious, primitive and ancient: part of a nebulous 'Dreamtime' that is uniquely Australian. Like the Egyptian pyramids, or Norman castle ruins, it is a heritage that can be dealt with as a commodity for consumption by a growing tourism market. There are numerous examples of rock art around, you don't have to pay copyright on it, and it doesn't pose difficult questions about the situation of Aboriginal people today. Meanwhile, we can get on with 'real' heritage issues in the Northern Territory, like building pearlimg museums, or restoring historical precincts in Alice Springs. And every 50 years or so, we can commemorate the bombing of Darwin by restoring World War II airstrips and ammunition dumps - and while we are at it, let us promote 'traditional' Territory ceremonies, such as the Beer Can Regatta or the Henley-on-Todd.

But the 'real' heritage that is being forgotten is on the other side of the frontier that the historian Henry Reynolds described in his first book on Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations over a decade ago. And, because it is on the other side of that frontier, much Aboriginal heritage of the last two centuries is about colonialism and its effects on Aboriginal people, or it is about Aboriginal resistance to colonialism. It is that which makes the heritage industry uncomfortable.

On 23 August 1983 the people of Daguragu and Kalkarindji celebrated the 17th anniversary of the historic Wave Hill Strike. It was a celebration not commemorated in books, or marked with memorial plaques, but in a re-enactment of the time when Gurindji and other stockmen and women walked off the Vestey-owned Wave Hill Station to begin a strike action which was to last nine years.

Hundreds of Aboriginal people, from old people down to little kids, traveled the route of the original walk-off, recreating the events of those days and events such as
digging for water in the dry bed of Gordy Creek. At each of the sites on that route - some of which also have traditional ritual significance - participants in the 1966 strike spoke to younger people about the reasons for the strike, and the struggles that took place in the years that followed until some of the Gurindji people's land was handed back to strike leader Vincent Lingiari by Gough Whitlam.

The re-enactment has taken place a number of times since then, most notably in 1991, the 25th anniversary of the action that was one of the earliest milestones of the modern land rights movement. The significance of the re-enactments has been their celebration of the living heritage of Aboriginal people.

Not surprisingly, but sadly, these celebrations have barely rated a mention in the Northern Territory, still less by its media and the Northern Territory Government. It is as if this event had never taken place.

Why is there this blindness to the Aboriginal part of the Northern Territory's heritage?

As you drive down the track between here and Alice Springs, there are a large number of 'historic markers', commemorating non-Aboriginal history, from the days of the so-called 'explorers' to more recent times and events. They are funded and erected by the Northern Territory Government. Unless you count the signs commemorating attacks by 'natives' on white exploring or droving parties there are, as far as I am aware, no 'historic markers' commemorating anything in Aboriginal history or tradition.

It is as if history did not commence until Ludwig Leichhardt headed north 150 years ago.

To counter this, and to promote wider community understanding of Aboriginal heritage, about 10 years ago an Aboriginal arts and craft organisation in Katherine put a proposal forward to the local tourist association to fund the design, production and erection of about 30 signs in and around the town showing the traditional significance of different sites to local Jawoyn people. From Springvale and the Low Level Crossing west of town up to the entrance of the Katherine Gorge the arts organisation, with the help and approval of senior Jawoyn people, had identified the sites and organised the funding for the signs to be installed at no cost to local authorities.

What happened to this attempt by Aboriginal people to share their heritage with non-Aboriginal people?

With the exception of one local motel owner, the response of the local tourist association was lukewarm. They insisted it be referred to the town council. The Katherine Town Council was openly hostile, and refused permission for the project on the grounds that it would foster division in the community, and that people 'might' take pot shots at the signs with rifles.

This occurred during the period of the Jawoyn Land Claim over Ntimiluk (then Katherine Gorge) National Park. It was a time of considerable tension in the town, and indeed shots were fired over the heads of two senior claimants during the period; there was a street demonstration against the claim led by the then speaker of the Legislative Assembly under the banner of 'Rights for Whites'.

So the admission by the Katherine Town Council - which actively opposed the land claim - that people might fire guns at signs celebrating Aboriginal heritage was significant. More significant, perhaps, was the town council's admission that to acknowledge Aboriginal heritage at all was something that would provoke hostility.

The blindness to Aboriginal heritage on the part of so many non-Aboriginal people is, I believe, because Aboriginal heritage is a living heritage. It is not something that can be conveniently stuffed into a museum and forgotten or viewed as mere ethnic curiosities, or relegated to the 'Dreamtime' of rock paintings and so on. The works of Aboriginal people that are in museums have direct links with people still living and practicing traditional beliefs and law. The paintings on rocks that you see in places like Kakadu have direct links with ceremonial practices that are alive and well and carried out by thousands of people in the Top End. Similarly, the concrete foundations of the old Retta Dixon Home have direct links to scores of Aboriginal families here in the Top End.

People choose to be blind to this living heritage because it confronts them with a shared history of colonialism in the Northern Territory - and it makes them uncomfortable; so uncomfortable, indeed, that a recent Northern Territory minister in charge of the museum here at Bullocky Point gave an official directive to increase the amount of space devoted to the 'white settlement' part of the museum because he believed there was too much emphasis on Aboriginal art in that institution.

Similarly, while museums all around the world are returning artifacts and ceremonial objects to their indigenous owners, the Northern Territory Government has established the Strehlow Research Centre in Alice Springs with the specific intention of restricting access by Aboriginal people from ownership or control over their heritage.

So the notion of a 'shared' heritage here in the Northern Territory is something of a myth, simply because many non-Aboriginal people don't acknowledge there is an Aboriginal heritage to be 'shared' in the first place. As my story about Queen Mother Park showed, often the only way Aboriginal heritage will be recognised is for our people to take direct action to reclaim those things that have been stolen or forgotten.

But things are changing, not least because of the increasing control Aboriginal people have been able to achieve since
the coming of things such as the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act*. The land base this legislation has gained for many Aboriginal groups in the Northern Territory has done much to put Aboriginal heritage on the agenda - not just as a commodity for the tourist trade, but in its own right as a vital aspect of the Northern Territory’s heritage.

One way this has happened has been through the land claim process itself. I am not sure how widely this is known, but each land claim that has been prepared on behalf of claimants includes extensive histories of the claimant groups, especially post contact histories. They make fascinating reading, and provide a dramatically different view of the last 150 years of the Northern Territory than you could expect from just reading the ‘historic marker’ signs down the track.

Deborah Bird Rose, an anthropologist who has worked on a number of claims, describes them as ‘hidden histories’. These ‘hidden histories’ are at the heart of our heritage in the Northern Territory. Until recently these histories were shared - but only among Aboriginal people ourselves. The land claim process, among other things, now gives all of us the opportunity to know and share our living heritage with non-Aboriginal people.

There is no excuse now for non-Aboriginal people to ignore this heritage, and no excuse for it not to be acknowledged. The Mabo High Court ruling told the world what Aboriginal people have known for a long time, that Australian history thus far has been based on a lie, the lie that Australia was *terra nullius* on the arrival of the British. What has to be now acknowledged is that Australian history has been a history of colonialism, and that if we are to ever become a mature nation and grow out of the colonial era, we have to recognise the heritage of the people who were the victims of colonialism, as well as the heritage of the colonisers. Then we might indeed be able to manage a ‘shared’ heritage.

It is significant that an opening session of this conference was presented by Gary Lee, a Larrakia anthropologist, writer and visual artist and, in the context of this conference, a representative of the traditional owners of land in and around Darwin.

Gary was, incidentally, an employee of the Katherine organisation I mentioned earlier, so I’d like to think that the insights he was able to give the conference also reflect the things he learned from Aboriginal people in the Katherine area. People like Gary have learned from his own people - in his case the Larrakia - as well as from the other Aboriginal groups he worked with like the Jawoyn, Mayali, Dalabon, Rembangna, Gurindji, Warlpiri and so on. Like many Aboriginal people, he shares his heritage with other Aboriginal people in a very real and dynamic way.

The challenge being posed by Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory is for our heritage to be acknowledged and accepted by others as an intrinsic part of ‘the story of the Northern Territory’. It means accepting the validity of our experiences and our knowledge, and the active participation and support of the heritage ‘industry’ in recognising the importance of the living heritage of indigenous Australians.

As I said, things are changing - and for the better. Earlier this year a Katherine motel management produced a brochure that sums up very well how our mutual heritages can be shared. The motel is named after the Katherine River crossing that was the site of a pub owned by a non-Aboriginal man named George Knott. It is also the site where the Overland Telegraph line crosses the river and - yes - it is marked by another of those historic markers. However, the brochure for the new motel in Katherine also gives Knott’s Crossing its Jawoyn name - Marndarpa - and explains the Aboriginal significance of the crossing, as well as describing to visitors the names of other Jawoyn sites along the river.

The motel management is to hold discussions with the Jawoyn Association about putting a new ‘historic marker’ at the crossing, next to the one describing the Overland Telegraph. And of course, there has been no talk of promoting community division, let alone using firearms. It may not seem like much, but we’ve come a long way in ten years: the new motel owners see acknowledging Aboriginal heritage as part of providing visitors with quality experience, as well as good business sense.

With much of Australian heritage being a colonialist one, it should not be forgotten that we should be researching and preserving the histories of the resisters to colonialism as well as the colonisers. As a T-shirt pointed out a few years ago - “White Australia has a black history”. If we are to ‘manage a shared heritage’, the history we learn and commemorate should be the history of all our peoples, and not just those now celebrated on the ‘historic markers’ down the track.

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