The cultural landscapes of Aboriginal long distance exchange systems: can they be confined within our heritage registers?¹

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In the week before this conference I attended a seminar on the noted classical historian W. W. Tarn. His work dominated Hellenistic studies through the early decades of this century, and is still revered for its meticulous scholarship. The speaker focussed on Tarn’s work in relation to his personal values. I learnt that he also wrote books for children; these included The Treasure of the Isle of Mist. The Isle of Mist was Skye, where Tarn holidayed with his family. Its treasure

Figure 1: Aboriginal trade routes in the Lake Eyre/Cooper Basin.
was not ancient heirlooms, not gold, but the spiritual quality of the island's landscape. It could be classified, by a mind attuning to world heritage terminology and preparing itself for the Robertson meeting, as an associative cultural landscape, characterised by special social values. That Tarn, over 70 years before, had identified this quality of the Skye landscape as predominant, caught my imagination.

In Aboriginal Australia the landscape also holds predominant spiritual qualities, its places linking the present with the world of ancestral creative beings in ways that powerfully affirm and sustain collective identity. This paper is based on research in progress on Aboriginal exchange systems of the Lake Eyre/Cooper Basin. It is part of a long-term archaeological and ethnohistorical study.

These east central Australian exchange linkages join Australia's south and north, the Flinders Ranges and Spencer's Gulf to the Gulf of Carpentaria (see figure 1). They traverse the desert core of the continent, a landscape of outstanding beauty, but limited resources, little surface water and uncertain climatic regimes. The environmental stress for desert groups is such that some researchers have identified the documented social alliances and exchange networks as adaptive strategies vital to desert living. The networks are certainly amongst the most extensive known from hunter-gatherer societies worldwide. Through them moved a diversity of goods, some essential raw materials unavailable locally (eg. hatchet head stone), some of symbolic or spiritual value, including stories, songs and dances.

From the Kimberley and Cape York came pearl and balar shell ornaments, acquiring important ritual status. People also moved along these defined routes, taking long dangerous journeys, often of ceremonial significance, to acquire valued items such as the ochre and grinding stones from the Flinders Ranges.

Journeys of many hundreds of kilometres were made to attend the ‘markets' on the Mulligan distributing bundles of *pituri* (a narcotic prepared from the leaves of *Duboisea Hopwoodii*). The groves of these trees were carefully tended and the secrets of preparation closely guarded by their traditional owners.

The major features of this exchange system are its extent and the range of goods (of utilitarian and symbolic values) in constant movement along its lines of travel. No major monuments mark this route, though these are important, and large, archaeological assemblages marking the traditional meeting and ceremonial places at which exchange took place (see figure 2). There are also extensive quarry sites, sources of material for hatchet heads, grindstones and ochres. Many of these are celebrated in creation or other stories; they are places of power and spiritual significance.

Yet one can still ask whether the totality of these places differs significantly from other aggregations of archaeological sites, linked systematically by the rhythms of hunter-gatherer land use and settlement? Why is this situation, in my argument, appropriately seen as a cultural landscape? What makes it distinct?
Figure 2 Sources and exchange centres for the movement of haches.
The archaeological materials, in their patterned distribution of significant exotic items suggest a system — a system which matches that documented in the ethnographic and historical records. These patterns form an overlay above those of the subsistence regime and daily life. The places are also linked in stories of the activities of ancestral, creative beings, often forming long storylines or song cycles. The products of major quarries, whose creation is also celebrated in story, are known as objects of more than utilitarian meaning (eg. ochre from Pukardu Hill near Parachilna, grindstones from the Wadla Walyu quarry near Reaphook Hill [Vilivarunha]). So I would argue that we have here a system, a network of nodal linkages. It is recognisable archaeologically, and may be interpreted in terms of the documented exchange practices. I would also argue that it forms a cultural landscape, of the kind we would call associative, because the exchange system and its components, together with the transactions and their cultural meanings, provide an overarching coherence.

This coherence is a mental construct, not a physical entity. It does have material expression, however, in the archaeology of places and the spatial distribution of raw materials (see figure 2). This mental construct may be found in the conceptual frameworks and knowledge systems of two cultures.

First there is the creating Aboriginal culture's knowledge of the trading alliances, the social and ritual, as well as the economic linkages, that are served and expressed by exchanges of goods that move along these invisible, but well known and clearly defined corridors across the landscape. The corridors are marked only by the nodes of ceremonial and meeting places. There are also the storied sites of ancestral heroes that created the landscape and its resources. Such places hold powerful social significance. As Morphy tells us:

... the resilience of the network of linkages between ancestral beings and places is a reflection of the fact that the attachment of people to place through the mediating process of the ancestral past is part of the core structure of Aboriginal society.1

Conceptualising places and landscapes in this context also raises questions about attitudes to the ownership of land, and the control, sharing or distribution of resources. Hiatt, in discussing traditional attitudes to land and resources, argues that ownership of land is:

... typically seen as dependent upon ownership of symbols representing or emanating from ancestral powers (icons, designs, songs, dances, ceremonies and so on). Because the creative acts of the heroes were particular rather than generalised, and because the mythological record of their movements over the landscape is detailed and definite, ritualised affirmations of ties between man and land tend to be topographically specific rather than diffuse.2

Hiatt further argues that for these reasons land, constituting group estates, is inalienable and rights in relation to it strictly defined and guarded. However, the resources of these estates may be shared with others, according to traditional practices and conventions. The ethic of generosity, with its high moral and secular value may moderate the traditions of trespass and controlled access to significant resources. Myers, in a recent discussion of the role of exchange in...
Figure 3. Sources and exchange centres for the movement of ochre.
the creation of social identity within Pintubi society, also stresses the importance of generosity and reciprocity as guiding moral principles.

It is these powerful social values and practices that form the context within which we may see exchange systems acting as significant ‘adaptive strategies’ for desert living, allowing access to the resources of allied groups. The systems of course also ameliorate the inadequacies of local resources by distributing rare raw materials. Yet from the ethnographic and historical records as well as oral testimony, we sense that it is the symbolic significance that drives the system—that is, the values and meanings of the items and their places of origin, and the spiritual significance of the journeys to source where items are so acquired. *Pituri*, however, may stand outside this framework as an addictive psychotropic drug whose acquisition may have other imperatives.

All this involves places and material objects, but they acquire powerful symbolic values, and perform significant symbolic roles. Throughout the system the sources of materials are known, also the related stories. The lines of travel are also known, most predetermined by those of the ancestral heroes (cf the routes to the Pukardu Hill ochre mine from Wankangurru or Dieri country (see figure 3)). Expeditions to sources, such as those to Pukardu Hill, were often important in group ritual life. So the total system and its meanings are well established in the minds of those involved in its individual ceremonial or productive components. It is an expression of spiritual and social systems with the important places providing the vital links to the presence of the ancestral past.

The Lake Eyre/Cooper Basin exchange system also exists in a second set of mental constructs. Those belong to the researchers, the archaeologists, schooled in western scientific traditions of the construction of knowledge. They use archaeological evidence, the material presence of the past, to reconstruct the patterns of procurement, production and distribution of the objects taken or sent down the exchange lines. So the material record on those sites that are components of the system, nodes in the linked lines of travel, or camping places along them, may be interpreted and seen to fit the model of exchange system. Precise materials analysis (eg. petrology and geochemistry) and analysis of distribution arrays provide the fundamental empirical data.

So, in effect, we arrive at two articulated cultural landscapes. There is the Aboriginal landscape, that ‘world mapped by stories’, to use Salman Rushdie’s response to central Australian travel. There is also the archaeological landscape of sites relating to the procurement and distribution of material goods, whose analysis indicates values for these goods that are both economic/technological and symbolic.

These two constructed landscapes articulate at the interpretive level as an exemplar of one of the most extensive and complex exchange systems in the hunter-gatherer world (this last of course also being an intellectual construct).
To the archaeologists, ethnohistorians and anthropologists, this system has clear significance and may be assessed, analysed, classified, bounded by the conventions and practices of academic research. Scholarship provides the appropriate tools. How does the heritage world approach such an entity, conceptualise and assess its various attributes? For sites (places) and monuments it also has a long established set of appropriate approaches.

In recent years it has been found helpful, in assessing cultural heritage places, to consider them in relation to major themes in global, national, or regional history. For example, the Australian Heritage Commission adopts such an approach in evaluating places for listing on the Register of the National Estate, and Domicelj, Halliday and James argued its value in providing a framework for assessing contenders for World Heritage listing. This particular exchange system could be seen as exemplifying the global development of trading systems, the diversity of social roles for exchange, and adaptations that allow effective living in harsh or uncertain physical environments.

We have, then, a significant cultural entity, that meets the definition of a cultural landscape and illustrates significant themes in human history and existing cultural practices. It has strong documentation in the life and oral traditions of the indigenous people of the region. It also has strong documentation in archaeological and ethnohistorical research. This documentation demonstrates clearly the values, both scientific and social, that the cultural entity holds.

Yet there may still be problems for the heritage manager. The cultural entity is not encapsulated in defining monuments — the routes are known, but not denoted by physical markers such as roads, signs or boundaries. It is a mental construct for both cultures identifying it. It is, in fact, a way of seeing the landscape, which brings us to Hoskins' definition of a cultural landscape. The mental construct systematises component elements and the linkages between these. It also recognises the important aspects of social life which the system underpins, aspects we considered earlier.

How then might the heritage administrator 'capture' this significant entity, respecting its totality and integrity? How can we create of it a legislated 'heritage' item? In other words, how do we represent its full significance, its 'voicefulness' in Ruskin's terms, in heritage administration terms? Further, this representation will have to be implemented at two levels, each with its own set of demands and constraints:
- listing/registering
- management

The components of the system are places and the lines of travel between them. So the system could be seen as a continent-wide 'serial site'. It comprises multiple components, each holding multiple values and meanings, often in two cultures, that of the creating Aboriginal societies and that of the researchers (archaeologists, linguists, anthropologists and historians). It presents no major
marking monuments, the extended line of linked places denoted by the community of archaeological materials and the community of storyline and social meaning. There will, of course, also be places within the network that provide no archaeological manifestation at all, are known only through story and oral tradition. Yet their cultural or social value is none the less strong.

So a conceptual framework for categorisation and listing may be established. Practical questions might still arise, at both listing and management levels. Acquiring relevant specific documentation for components may prove challenging. It demands detailed multi-disciplinary field work, consultation and archival research for the various sections of the system and associated places. The relevant Aboriginal custodians for each component must be involved. Indeed, such documentation can only proceed with their full assent and collaboration. Locating the appropriate custodians could constitute a long consultative process. Defining the entity itself will raise questions when addressed at this practical level, given its linear, serial nature. Is it comprised of the places along the route, or is it the line of travel between them? If the latter, then does it exist on the ground in any physical sense, or is it only found in the mind of those who have travelled it or celebrated it in song? How is such knowledge of this line across the landscape transmitted in the creating culture? If we define the route as a distinct line of travel how is it to be located on the ground, mapped, allocated boundaries and so able to meet the needs of the heritage manager?

To establish appropriate management regimes, significance and its constituent values must be documented. Yet for many important places we have to recognise that much important information may, for cultural reasons, not be readily available, but restricted, even within the custodial group. Therefore it may not be possible for traditional owners to share the knowledge of the associated ‘meanings’ and values, or to give open access to the stories that encapsulate them. There may even be reluctance to have certain places publicly listed as heritage sites, or their locations mapped, even though most heritage agencies can assure confidentiality of, and restricted access to, their records. These aspects of heritage — management in a cross-cultural context — demand sensitivity in establishing programs for site evaluation, registration, documentation and management. Management should, wherever possible, be a matter of partnership, with full involvement of local Aboriginal people.

The Lake Eyre/Cooper exchange system, given its extent, will thus involve consultation and collaborative work with many Aboriginal groups. No one group could speak for its entirety. As the linkages cross landscapes subject to modern non-Aboriginal land use, whether protected reserves, pastoral, agricultural or mining, other interest groups within Australian society must also be part of the process of developing and implementing appropriate management practices. Heritage and scientific expertise and experience must also be brought to bear. This may well involve heritage agencies of differing levels of

endnotes

1 The writer is indebted to Geoffrey Bartlett of the Australian National University for insights into Tarn's awareness of the spiritual qualities of landscape. She is also indebted to the Australian Research Council for its grants supporting field and library research on the Lake Eyre Basin exchange systems. To Luise Hercus, Vlad Potezny and Aboriginal guides Arthur Warren, Ben Murray and Pearl McKenzie, thanks for advice and companionship and ochre exploration. To Jean Goodrum and Win Mumford re-drew the maps for publication with their usual skill.


4 Mulvaney, op cit; Luise Hercus, "How we danced the Mudlunga": Memories of 1901 and 1902, 1980, pp. 4-31; R. Kimber, 'Mulunga: old Mulungas Good corroborate, they reckon”., in P. Austin et al. (eds), Language and History: Essays in honour of Luise A. Hercus, Pacific Linguistics Series C 116, Australian National University, Canberra, 1990, pp. 175-191.

government, and of differing governmental jurisdictions. The complexity of the exchange system itself and its roles in Aboriginal society will be reflected in the complexity of the processes necessary to create management structures that meet the needs. These needs of course encompass the protection of values, which may be diverse, even conflicting.

Yet complex as the task of capturing such entities for the heritage register may seem, its rewards are rich. It is important that we incorporate into the domain of protected and recognised heritage these exchange linkages. The concept of cultural landscape offers an appropriate framework. Such entities are of vital importance for their creating cultures, past and present. To ignore them is to ignore significant aspects of Aboriginal culture. It also exposes us to the risk that we create in our registers a representation of Aboriginal culture, as exemplified in place, that is predominantly monumental, conforming to our European traditions of 'heritage', rather than the values and practices of the creating culture. If our registers are to be ‘representative’ with all that this implies, then we must address the complexities attendant on assessing such entities and include within their confines the storied landscapes of the long-distance exchange systems.