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MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY

AN ABORIGINAL ONTOLOGY OF BEING AND PLACE:

THE PERFORMANCE OF ABORIGINAL PROPERTY RELATIONS IN THE PRINCESS CHARLOTTE BAY AREA OF EASTERN CAPE YORK PENINSULA, AUSTRALIA

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

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DECLARATION

To the best of my knowledge and belief, the work presented in this thesis is original and my own work, except as acknowledged otherwise in the text. This material has not been submitted, in whole or in part, at this or any other University.

Marcia Lynne Langton

ABSTRACT

This thesis presents an ethnographic study of the property relations of the Aboriginal people of Princess Charlotte Bay area of eastern Cape York Peninsula, Australia. It sets out the possibilities of inscribing an interpretive account of Aboriginal property relations, and the land tenure system that the subjects themselves subscribe to as matters of tradition and custom, albeit changing and dynamic, by means of an investigation of the performative aspects of the social and subjective expression of these matters. Critical and interpretive theorists and exponents of phenomenological approaches to anthropological endeavour enriched my capacity to explain the distinctively Aboriginal conceptions of such matters — an Aboriginal ontology of being and place — grounded in an Aboriginal way of conceptualising the world.

Despite the radical alteration to their traditional economic and social life that followed colonisation and enforced settlement, groups of traditional owners, guided by Elders, maintained their traditions of property relations in estates and territories, and other phenomena, reinvigorating them with strategic interventions that transformed the burden of their subaltern history into a vision for the future. They engaged with the consequences of the changes that resulted from the settler colonisation of their world, and continued to practise rituals and customs which inscribe places with sacred meaning and historical memory and express the legitimacy of their tenure. Such traditions include a range of classical and postcolonial Aboriginal social principles and laws, including descent principles and language affiliation, religious beliefs and customs, the practice of various rituals, and their land use and management practices.

In this study, their knowledge and practices concerning use of fire and water forms and bodies are revealed as active and purposeful stewardship of land and waterscapes and the flora and fauna on which they still depend to a significant extent for their livelihoods, and critically as the performance of property relations. Property relations are found to be embedded in the texture of other social relations and subservient to the fundamental social relationship with the sacred ancestral past which bestows not just property rights, but a social world, as a sacred endowment.

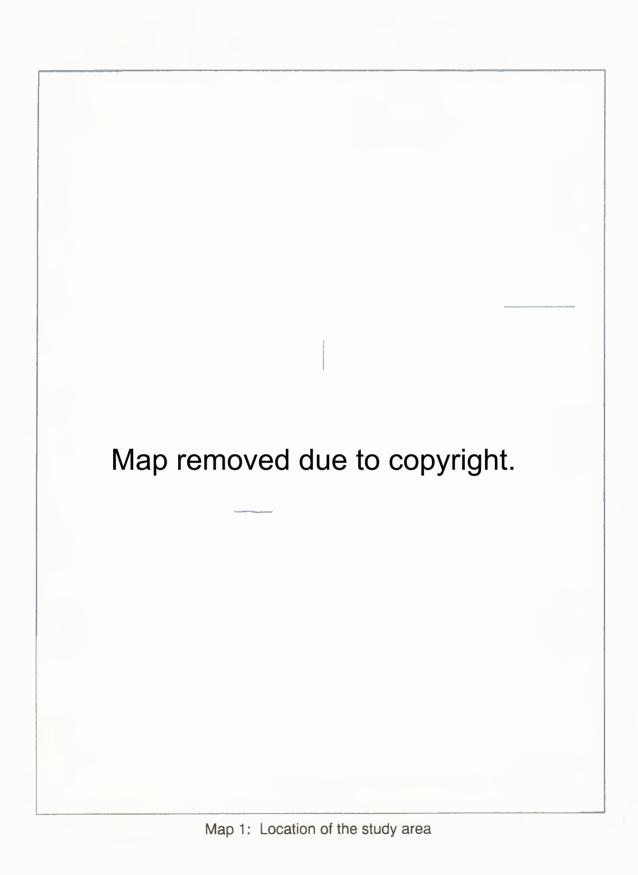
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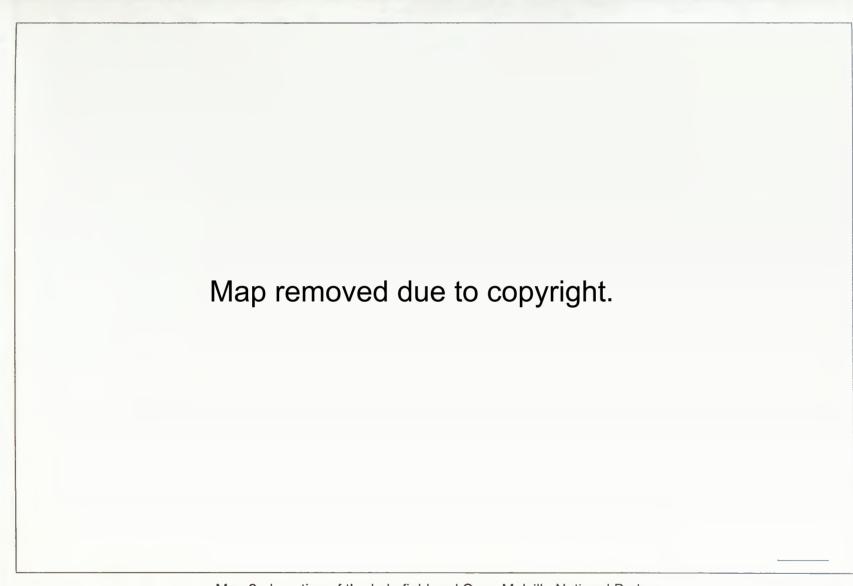
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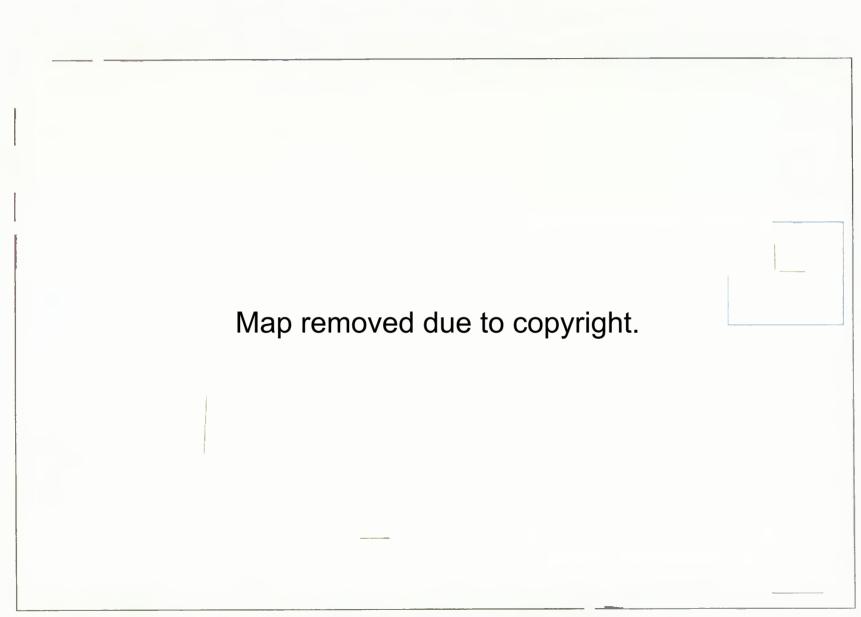
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Map 2: Location of the Lakefield and Cape Melville National Parks



Map 3: Queensland land tenure in the area of study

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¹ The Awu Alaya people prefer this name, as their project on documenting traditional knowledge attests. However, throughout the Lakefield National Park and Cliff Islands land claim they were referred to as Kuku Thaypan, which is a language-denoting name for the group which they also use. See footnote 6

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Any errors or misunderstandings that remain are my responsibility alone.