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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

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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.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION	i
ABSTRACT	ii
Maps of the area of study	viii
Map 1: Location of the study area.....	viii
Map 2: Location of the Lakefied and Cape Melville National Parks	ix
Map 3: Queensland land tenure in the area of study	x
Acknowledgments	xi
Chapter 1	1
INTRODUCTION.....	1
An Aboriginal Ontology: The human condition and places of power	1
Introduction to the thesis.....	2
The peoples of Princess Charlotte Bay	14
Aboriginal land tenure as a creature of anthropological codification	16
Models of Aboriginal tenure as heuristic logic in anthropological studies.....	16
The construction of artificial jural rights	19
The diaspora and returning to home.....	22
Aboriginal strategies of restitution.....	24
The landscape behind the landscape: sacred geography	25
<i>Story</i> : time, space and being.....	26
Earth, wind, fire and water: Aboriginal engagement with fire and water.....	29
Aboriginal knowledge of fire and its transformative power	29
The temporality of landscapes	31
Earth, wind, fire and water	31
A study of Aboriginal property relations: Spatiality, temporality and agency ...	33
An anthropological approach to property relations in an Aboriginal society ..	33
An ethnography of contestation: places, disputes and multiple jural accounts...37	
A summary of the methods of inquiry: fieldwork and participant observation	38
Agency, exegesis and ethnographic representations	40
Chapter 2	45
THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY	45
The biogeographic, ethnographic, and historical features of the social setting of the study	45
The physical environment of the study area	47
The ethnographic discourse and the “scientific” interest in Aboriginal life ...	53
Two centuries of transformation of Pama society: from colonial subjecthood to postcolonial agency.....	67
The sedentarisation of Aboriginal people in missions and settlements	82
The twentieth century land grabs: the ruse of nature conservation.....	91
The negotiation of postcolonial problems.....	99
Chapter 3	105

THE LIMITS OF LEGAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL NOTIONS OF ABORIGINAL PROPERTY	105
Jural constructs versus the corporeal Aboriginal title of lived experience	105
What is property?	106
The embeddedness of property relations.....	116
Aboriginal property and the jurisprudence of denial	119
Aboriginal statutory rights to land after the Gove Land Rights case	123
The Mabo No 2 case: the implications for an understanding of Aboriginal property relations	125
Native title and artificial jural rights	127
The 'bundle of rights' theory versus proprietary rights	130
'Kinds of rights in country'	136
'Land is susceptible of ownership'	147
Individual versus joint entitlements to property.....	149
A 'guardianship for social purposes'	151
A critical interpretive approach to Aboriginal property concepts.....	155
Chapter 4	159
METHODOLOGY, LAW, POLICY AND ANTHROPOLOGY.....	159
Australian anthropology in the service of the courts	159
Kinship, descent and land tenure as anthropological constructs.....	161
Developments in land rights recognition in Queensland: the land claims	172
Anthropology in the service of the judiciary.....	186
The lineage of inquiry into place and lived experience	190
Sacred geography and revelation: places as events.....	191
Chapter 5	209
THE DIASPORA AND THE RETURN: PAIN AND RESISTANCE	209
Introduction: the painful recollections of the removals	210
Population transfer and the regime of control.....	214
The Yiithuwarra diaspora.....	221
The removal of the Lamalama from Port Stewart.....	227
The restoration of community life.....	235
The historical Records as a part of contemporary Aboriginal tradition.....	246
The last frontier: the end of fear.....	254
Conclusion.....	259
Chapter 6	265
THE EDGE OF THE SACRED, THE EDGE OF DEATH:	265
Sensual inscriptions of place and spiritual affiliations to estates	265
Ancestral links.....	267
Spiritual association to places as affiliation to land	271
The authority of the Elders.....	273
Envisioning place	277
The Old People as mediators of life and death	279
<i>Story</i>	280
'You sing out'	282
Gender, place and sharing fish and meat	283
'Giving smell'	284
<i>Alkuperr</i>	284

‘Warming’	285
Burning.....	286
Discussion	288
Conclusion.....	291
Chapter 7	299
BURN GRASS AND STORM BURN	299
Aboriginal Knowledge of Fire in the Laura Basin.....	299
Introduction: continuing Aboriginal use of fire in eastern Cape York	300
Fire and anthropogenic fire impacts.....	309
The impact of the stock grazing economy on the landscape and indigenous fire regime.....	318
The introduction of cattle herds and rangeland burning by graziers for stock feed	328
Reading the landscape: fire, wind and water	330
Aboriginal and white grazier neighbours: the new built environment and firebreaks.....	335
Fire and National Parks: the Aboriginal encounter with National Park Rangers	338
Trespassers	343
Fire, Law way: legitimate firing of country according to Aboriginal laws	349
A Sacred Story: The Swimming Dog <i>Story</i>	349
‘Cleaning the country’	350
Traditional knowledge and cultural landscapes	352
Chapter 8	361
EARTH, WIND, FIRE AND WATER:	361
The Social and Spiritual Construction of Water in Pama Society	361
An Aboriginal Ontology of Waterscapes	365
A Sacred Story: water forms, ancestral beings and places.....	366
The Hammerhead and Groper waterhole	366
Waterscapes, water bodies and social institutions	370
The sociality of tenure.....	370
‘Boundaries’: ownership as management responsibility.....	373
Sharing freshwater and saltwater	378
Some aspects of an Aboriginal biogeographical approach to fire and Water ...	380
The traditional use of dew as an inhibitor of a fire front	380
Waterways as firebreaks	383
Discussion	385
Chapter 9	389
ABORIGINAL PROPERTY AS SACRED ENDOWMENT	389
The temporal and spatial dimensions of the concept of place among Pama.....	389
Introduction: the emergence of property relations from a phenomenological inquiry into social practices	390
Landscapes of danger and people with power	393
Encounter at the Hann River Crossing: the sentient landscape.....	393
Danger, power, authority and the sacred emblems of property relations.....	397
The sacred past and differentiation between estates	402
Metaphorical appropriation, land estate as property-objects, and identity ...	405

Places bind people together: relationships between groups408

Languages and ownership: differentiation and cohesion412

Allocating people in place: alliance, marriage and politicking.....418

Property as a conceptual category among Pama: The argument.....420

 An ontology of Aboriginal title.....420

The social, discursive and relational constitution of property in the Pama
cosmology423

 Death, the self and the Other.....423

 Death in places as a marker of significance425

Chapter 10433

CONCLUSION433

Bibliography.....443

Statutes480

Cases481



Map removed due to copyright.

Map 1: Location of the study area

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

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Map 3: Queensland land tenure in the area of study

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Any errors or misunderstandings that remain are my responsibility alone.