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Portals on a watery coast: heritage sites where past, present & future collide…

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Introduction

This paper represents work that was begun in the 1980s, reported on in the 1990s and now revisited in the noughties (Greer 1996a, 1996b, 1999, McIntyre-Tamwoy 2000, McIntyre-Tamwoy and Harrison 2004). This is relevant as the concepts and ideas presented here are 'unfinished business' as I have been trying to unravel them for more than 20 years. This is the latest attempt.

This research focuses on the indigenous cultural landscapes of northern Cape York, located at the very top of the Australian mainland. The land is controlled by Indigenous people, located in a number of communities drawn from groups originating both within and outside the study area. It is 1300 km from Townsville (which is where I am based), which is in turn 1300 km from Brisbane (which is in turn probably 1000 km or so from where most of you are based). So, in terms of this conference on 'Extreme Heritage', the study area would be considered *extremely* isolated by most Australians. Yet Jack McLaren, who operated a copra plantation in the area from 1911-1919, called his memoirs 'My Crowded Solitude'. At that time, the waters around Cape York teemed with vessels engaged in general shipping, and the pearling and beche-de-mer industries. For Indigenous people, this was an

extremely dangerous time due to the disease and abuses related to these maritime industries as well as the activities of settlers such as Frank Jardine at Somerset.

Northern Cape York is also an *extremely* beautiful place, as this slide shows. So, the study area is remote, dangerous and beautiful – a heady cocktail for a student of the human condition. But there are other ways in which it could be seen to be 'extreme'. Northern Cape York is itself an extremity – the extreme northern finger of land that points out into Torres Strait. It is *extremely* hot and wet in the Monsoon season and can be *extremely* windy on the east coast during the dry season when the South East trade winds blow.

The study area is something of a 'poster place' for climate change. Between 8000 and 6000 years ago, rising sea levels resulted in the sequential drowning of what David et al. (2004) have called 'Ancestral Cape York', that is, the land bridge that once connected Australia and New Guinea. At this time, hilltops became islands and the Torres Strait was formed. It seems reasonable to suggest that it might be an ideal context within which to study human responses to climate change. But that is the subject of ongoing research that I am conducting with Susan McIntyre-Tamwoy and Rosita Henry. Today I want to focus on a strip of land that runs along the east coast of the study area, from Fly Point (a few kilometers from the tip of Cape York and the historic settlement of Somerset) down to Jacky Jacky Creek.

A number of narratives emerge from this East Coast Strip, including the 'natural science story' that explains the dynamic formation and reformation of landscape features, the 'Indigenous story' that explains the creation and recreation of the

landscape and the ‘archaeological story’ that provides a window on human responses to change. These narratives are elements of the cultural heritage of northern Cape York peoples, although some have more contemporary resonance than others. I will now go into a little more detail for each of these, starting with what I have called the ‘Watery Realm’.

The Watery Realm

The landscape along this strip is dominated by water. When traveling along this narrow peninsular (which is only about 20km wide in places) there is an overwhelming presence of the sea. Even when in the interior, the land and vegetation ‘dip down’ to the sea on either side.

The east coast is characterized by sandy beaches nestled between rocky points. Large dunes of fine white sand run north-east to south-west, often forming the boundary with dry dune thickets which in turn border the red soil country of the interior. The area generally is extremely well-watered by large rivers (such as the Jardine and Escape Rivers and Jacky Jacky Creek) and is finely veined with water courses of all sizes (most of which are ephemeral). A ribbon of brackish lakes and dry lake beds, swamps and waterholes follow the sand ridges in a north-south trend, adding to the impression of a watery realm. During the monsoon, overland travel is all but impossible even where tracks exist.

The southern part of the strip is dominated by the extensive estuarine system of Jacky Jacky Creek and includes tidal flats with mangroves, saline flats, open swamps and monsoonal woodlands with patches of rainforest and swamp forest. While

mangroves are a significant feature today, shoreline features found inland from these suggest that they were not as extensive in the past. These include the parallel beach ridges, now stabilized by vegetation and lake features, some of which were dry when I last visited but which appear to occasionally fill (Meagher 1985).

These shoreline features suggests that this is a prograding shoreline; that is, one that is being built seaward by deposition or accumulation. The beach ridges may indicate fluctuations in sea level over time, certainly during the Holocene transgression. So, this watery realm may be a physical record of that period when the climate dramatically changed, sea levels were fluctuating and relationships between people and land were affected. It is therefore an excellent 'laboratory' to study the ways that humans respond to such events. But what do we know of relationships between people and land in this area? For this, we can turn to some of the contemporary Indigenous narratives.

'Bad Fasin' (Bad Fashion)

One of the most important stories for this area tells of the relationship between a mother and son. The son hunted for white pigeons for the two while the mother collected yams for them. But the boy discovered that the mother was keeping back the best yams for herself. Enraged by this, he dug up a big water vine and climbing inside, he tunneled down into the earth, emerging at a number of places and leaving behind pools of water as he headed north. He finally reached Payra (a small bay between Cape York and Somerset) and as he turned and continued, the passage between the mainland and Albany Island was created (Greer and Fuary 1993, Greer 1996a).

While this story has many levels of interpretation and meaning, in this paper, I am focusing on the concept of 'bad fasin' (bad fashion – bad manners or bad behaviour). The story is concerned with appropriate behaviour in relationships both with people and resources, bearing in mind that these are probably not particularly distinguished. In this case, the mother's selfish behaviour towards the son unleashes *extreme* behaviour, including major changes to the landscape and (we can imagine) all the cosmological associations that go with this. (And it is really tempting here to see a relict oral accounts of one of the final moments of sea level rise, characterized by the formation of the passage between the mainland and Albany Island). But the important point to grasp here is that relationships between people, land and resources are fragile. They are best preserved by avoiding 'bad fasin', and that mighty forces can be unleashed when things do get out of control.

But this story is not the only evidence of contemporary Indigenous practice in relation to this area. One is warned by traditional owners not to 'swear' the bush if irritated when walking through it. To do so would be 'bad fasin'. This landscape is populated by a range of supernatural beings including the spirits of deceased people as well as devils that can be either mischievous or malevolent (Greer 1996a, Greer et al. 2002, Mcintyre-Tamwoy 2000). Anyone traveling in this country should be formally introduced by traditional owners, which then affords them some protection from encounters with beings such as the devils that can range from the irritating to the downright abominable. The lack of such introductions is thus 'bad fasin' which may compromise the safety and health of individuals.

There are other practices in relation to the extraction of resources (including information) that involve the giving of 'gifts' to these supernatural beings. Examples of this include releasing the first catch back into the sea when fishing or leaving a burning cigarette when walking in the bush. So this might be considered to be 'good fasin' or good fashion or if I was really cheeky, 'best practice'.

Archaeology & Ethnography

In Greer (1996a) I documented some of the ways in which archaeological sites along this strip have been woven into the contemporary cosmology. In this paper, I will focus on three site complexes: the Sandago middens (Freshwater Bay) in the north, the artefact scatters along the shores of Lake Wicherua and in the south, a small site (known to us as the 'W' site) located in the swampy area west of Jacky Jacky Creek.

Before excavation work began on the Sandago sites, a small ceremony of introduction was conducted by traditional owners. This could not come soon enough as we had been camped in readiness near the site for a couple of weeks. During this time, my faithful team member (Maureen Fuary) and I had developed a debilitating illness of the gut. Upon hearing of this, people in the community remarked that this was due to the fact that we were unprotected in what was potentially dangerous country. This danger was primarily related to the presence of spirits and devils, but given added emphasis by the presence of a 19th Century massacre site at the most northerly beach of Newcastle Bay.

Survey and excavation of the Sandago middens revealed a picture of coastal dwellers that confirmed the ethnography of Brierly (Moore 1979). In particular, the sites were

littered with the remains of earth ovens that according to the ethnography were used to cook yams, mangrove pods, turtles and dugong. Evidence that these were used and re-used lay in the piles of stones that had either been used as cooking stones or brought to the site and piled in readiness for future use. Dating at this site was problematic; however the sites are only as old as the dunes on which they rest which were probably formed less than a thousand years ago.

The artefact scatters along the shores of Lake Wicheura presented another conundrum. Although an extremely likely spot, previous visits had yielded nothing in the way of archaeological material. Susan McIntyre and I were surprised on a subsequent occasion to locate a comparatively large quantity of flaked stone artefacts along the lake shore. Locals were not surprised at all, reminding us that on previous visits, we had not been formally introduced to country. We were told that the 'old people' (in this case spirits of the deceased) revealed evidence of themselves because we had behaved in 'good fasin' by introducing ourselves.

The site itself offers a counterpoint to the coastal middens at Sandago (less than 4kms away as the crow flies). The use of stone contrasts with its apparent lack on the middens; the location around a freshwater lake suggests exploitation of different resources yet the close proximity of the sites begs an interpretation of differential seasonal exploitation. This long-delayed work is currently being followed up this project I am working on with Susan McIntyre-Tamwoy and Rosita Henry.

The final site, the 'W', has the potential to link these stories together. We originally identified the 'W' feature from air photos before going into the field and thought that they might have archaeological potential.

While surface evidence at the 'W' site (when last visited) is poor, consisting of a few pieces of stone and some fragmented shell, it is interesting for a number of reasons. One of these is its location along what is possibly an older coastline, potentially providing evidence of coastal life beyond the last 1000 years. The 'W' site is also located in the general area where the boy in the water vine story began his journey northwards after the altercation with his mother. It is also one of the areas that northern Cape York peoples are most particular about observing 'good fasin'. At this point I want to turn to the notion of 'sites' or heritage places as portals…

Sites as 'portals' (not repositories or mnemonic devices)

Twenty years ago, I thought of archaeological sites (and here read 'heritage places') as 'repositories' – that is, places where information was stored, waiting for a practitioner such as myself to release it. Eleven years ago, in my PhD thesis, I referred to the Sandago sites as mnemonic devices, that is, devices that aid the memory. At the time, I alluded to the fact that they were more than that, but did not articulate this further. I also tried to conceptually link the different sorts of information, particularly the contemporary cosmology with archaeological sites. So, I referred to the Sandago sites as 'text' for the colonial history of northern Cape York.

In this part of the paper, I am trying to take the next conceptual step. The concept of heritage places as 'portals' is useful here. So what is a 'portal'? A portal is a gate or

entrance way – something that provided access. In the internet era, it is also a website that provides links to information and other websites. In the human body, the portal system is an opening in the liver through which the portal vein passes and it is my understanding that this is something that is fairly fundamental to one's life force. We can think of a portal then as a gate that provides access to other information that is embedded within a web of connections. Let's take these concepts and turn back to northern Cape York.

Geomorphological evidence suggests that the story of rising sea levels may be writ in the remnants of old shorelines at the southern end of the East Coast strip. The contemporary cosmology tells us that the landscape was created by the actions of people. It alerts us to the importance of 'good fasin' in relation to relationships between people and with resources and to the importance of this in avoiding dramatic consequences. In the story of the boy with the water vine, we strain to see a relict description (perhaps much modified) of the final stages of Holocene sea level rise. We strain to see in it remnants of the way that people explained this phenomenon by 'bad fasin' and perhaps also how they sought to literally stem the tide with 'good practice'. In the lake sites, artefacts appear and disappear according to one's adherence to 'good fasin', 'good practice'. This concept is also integral to the maintenance of wellbeing at Sandago where we worked on the middens. So it is reasonable to assume that there is a collection of practices that fall within the category of 'good fasin' and that these are associated with maintaining good relations between people and those elements of the landscape that are sometimes separated from sentient human life and reduced to 'resources'. We also know that these practices exist today

along a strip of coast that emerged, probably as a result of climate change, in the first half of the Holocene. But can we link these?

It is not possible to know, with any certainty, the antiquity of these practices and to associate them in any specific way with sea level change and the formation (and reformation) of the coast. But this is where the concept of archaeological sites as 'portals' may be useful. While it is impossible to 'dig up' direct evidence of concepts such as cosmology, archaeologists can define evidence of 'practices' with some degree of confidence. Thus, sites like the 'W' may reveal the kinds of practices that are expressive of the relationships, embedded within cosmology, between people and other elements of the landscape. Older frameworks focused on 'people-resource' relationships, interpreting change in these as 'adaptations' to environmental change. Here, change in practices are responses to change or challenge to world view. Fine-grained understanding of a wide set of practices is required such as resource use and settlement patterns but other, perhaps more obvious evidence of cosmology such as ceremonial activity is also required. It is also important to trace the connections, in time and space, between such evidence. The idea of heritage places as 'portals', that is, gateways to a web of interconnected information is useful here.

It is the way of science to categorize and compartmentalize information and this has influenced the way that we conceptualize and manage heritage places. But the heritage story for places like the East Coast strip lies in this web of interconnections – a sea of practices connected in time and space. The challenge is to recognize the portals that will give us access to this.

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