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PLACE-MAKING IN THE EAST KIMBERLEY

A study of land interests and symbolic capital in North West Australia

Ruth Lane
BSc Hons, Grad Dip Museum Studies, MA

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY FROM THE SCHOOL OF GEOSCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG, 2003
Certification

I, Ruth Lane, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the School of Geosciences, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Ruth Lane

25 February, 2003
Abstract

This thesis addresses the relationship between representations of place and embodied activity and experience. To translate this question into the context of the East Kimberley in the late 1990s, I focus on the manner in which planning processes since the 1960s have represented the East Kimberley as a place and ascribed value to land. Employing the concept of 'land interests', I describe in detail changing relationships to land for Aboriginal people, farmers and tourists since the 1960s. I focus on mobility, as an indicator of their embodied experience, and tease out aspects of the social identities of these groups that are produced through their changing relationships with land. Each land interest has produced representations of place, and I explore the paths by which these representations have gained a public or political audience over time.

In the late 1990s two developments dominated spatial politics in the region. A significant Native Title claim was lodged in the Federal Court of Australia by the Miriwwung and Gajerrong Aboriginal groups, and the Wesfarmers-Marubeni consortium put forward a proposal to greatly expand the existing area of irrigated agriculture in the Ord Valley for corporate farming of sugar cane. At the same time the region's tourism industry continued to expand. I analyse these developments in order to expose the iterative processes that operate between the production of place-images and rhetoric about place, and changes to land tenure, land use and management. In particular, I show how place-images, narratives and discourses about change and the past are mobilised in the context of contemporary spatial politics and planning processes.
Central to my analysis is Bourdieu's concept of 'symbolic capital'. Contemporary planning processes deploy specific forms of symbolic capital that align more closely with the interests of farmers and tourists than with Aboriginal people. In Chapter 8 I concentrate on ‘authenticity’ as a form of symbolic capital operating in both tourism and native title. In Chapter 9 I focus on the Ord Stage Two proposal, highlighting the manner in which ‘productivity’ and ‘sustainability’ are deployed as key forms of symbolic capital that justify why the scheme should proceed. The legal concepts of Aboriginal Land Rights and Native Title generate a new form of symbolic capital associated with continuity of Aboriginal cultural traditions and relationships with place. I analyse the potential for this to influence the way concepts such as ‘authenticity’ and ‘sustainability’ are interpreted. Planning associated with Ord Stage Two and with the various national parks in the East Kimberley relies on a notion of bounded or stratified space, which may be challenged by the recognition of co-existing Aboriginal land interests.

In conclusion, I consider how planning processes might better accommodate the fluid nature of people’s relations to place and to each other. The history of unequal power relations and the differential influence of some representations of place over others structures the spatial politics in which any planning occurs. However, processes that recognise emerging forms of symbolic capital that are shared by different land interests are more likely to allow synergies to occur. A ‘progressive sense of place’ (Massey 1993) could then develop in which both places and social relations would be recognised as always in a state of becoming.
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List of Acronyms

ABC Australian Broadcasting Commission
CDEP Community Development Employment Program
CSIR Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research
CSIRO Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
DNR Department of Natural Resources
EIS Environmental Impact Assessment
ERMP Environmental Review and Management Plan
FCA Federal Court of Australia
ILUA Indigenous Land Use Agreement
KLC Kimberley Land Council
KRS Kimberley Research Station
KST Kimberley Specialists in Tourism
NLC Northern Land Council
ORIA Ord River Irrigation Area
RAAF Royal Australian Air Force
SBS Special Broadcasting Service