Place-making in the East Kimberley: a study of land interests and symbolic capital in North West Australia

Ruth Lane
University of Wollongong

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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
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 Miriuwung 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.
Acknowledgements

This thesis could not have been produced without the support of a range of institutions and individuals. An Australian Postgraduate Award provided me with a living allowance for three and a half years. Fieldwork was supported by a grant from the Environment Research Institute at the University of Wollongong, and by an ARC Large Grant awarded to Lesley Head and Richard Fullagar (No. A59905957). Particular thanks are due to the Northern Territory Archives Service for their sponsorship of the interview component of the project. Interviews were recorded on digital audio tape recorders lent by the Northern Territory Archives Service. Recordings were subsequently lodged with the Archive where they were transcribed in full. The Archive then assumed responsibility for contacting interviewees to ask them to set the conditions of access for both audiotapes and transcripts. The Native Title Transcripts were available for public access at the Federal Court Office in Perth, and I am grateful to staff there for their assistance. The State Library and Information Service of Western Australia permitted me to make copies of archival films relating to the East Kimberley. Other archival films were obtained through the Australian Broadcasting Commission and Screensound Australia.

I am most grateful to Bruce Shaw for making available his field notes from a sociological research project conducted in Kununurra in 1970. Various scholars with lengthy experience working with Miriuwung and Gajerrong people provided valuable perspectives that assisted my interpretation of material in the Native Title transcripts, particularly Patrick Sullivan, Frances Kofod and Ken Mulvaney. Further assistance was drawn from scholars who had engaged extensively with the complex issues of Native Title and Aboriginal Land Rights. Tim Rowse was particularly helpful with this aspect of my work. In 1999 I participated in a
Visiting Scholars Program at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at the Australian National University. I drew further inspiration from various conferences and seminars at which I presented papers during the course of the work.

My supervisors, Lesley Head and Gordon Waitt, provided continuing inspiration and valuable criticism throughout the project. Special thanks is also due to fellow PhD students who provided much needed sounding boards at critical times. They include Ingereth Macfarlane, Jane Lydon, Jenny Atchison and Yasmine Musharbash. During fieldwork, I benefited from discussions with Cath Elderton, Sue Jackson, Daniel Suggit and Scott Goodson, among others. The generosity of friends and family in providing me with cars, accommodation or other support greatly helped my capacity to survive the years on low income. Particular thanks are due to Andrew Loughhead, Helen Harper, Michael Duffy, Sally Stephens and Sue Hardisty, and to my parents, Ron and Joan Lane. My final thanks must go to all those who assisted me in the course of fieldwork, especially to Biddy Simon and her family, and to those who volunteered their time and knowledge for interviews.
Table of Contents

PART I: INTRODUCTION AND FRAMING

Chapter 1: Introduction ............................................................................................................. 1

1.1 Research question and scope ......................................................................................... 2

1.2 Rationale .......................................................................................................................... 3

1.3 Implications ....................................................................................................................... 6

1.4 Structure of the thesis ...................................................................................................... 7

Chapter 2: Theoretical framing - a relational approach to place ......................................... 11

2.1 Relational approaches to place ....................................................................................... 11

2.2 Social relations and place making processes .................................................................. 15

2.2.1 Social identifications as ‘land interests’ ................................................................. 16

2.2.2 Mobility ...................................................................................................................... 18

2.2.3 Representations of place and people ........................................................................ 20

2.3 Methodological strategies .............................................................................................. 21

2.3.1 Relationships and ‘interests’ on my part ................................................................. 27

PART II: DEVELOPMENT OF LAND INTERESTS

Chapter 3: Becoming a region ............................................................................................... 31

3.1 Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 31

3.2 Approach and methods .................................................................................................. 32

3.3 Nineteenth century exploration ..................................................................................... 33

3.4 Early twentieth century scientific surveys .................................................................... 36
3.5 The 1940s – rural reconstruction, water resources and scientific surveys. 41

3.5.1 Rural reconstruction ............................................................................................................. 43

3.5.2 Land surveys and scientific initiatives .................................................................................. 47

3.6 Conclusion ............................................................................................................................... 53

Chapter 4: Aboriginal land interests ......................................................................................... 55

4.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................................. 55

4.2 Sources and methods .............................................................................................................. 56

4.2.1 Fieldwork ............................................................................................................................ 56

4.2.2 Native Title hearings and transcripts .................................................................................. 59

4.2.3 Narrative forms and performative contexts ......................................................................... 65

4.3 ‘Station times’ ........................................................................................................................ 67

4.3.1 Seasonal mobility and social groupings ............................................................................. 69

4.3.2 Ngarranggarni, ceremony and religious life - station times ................................................. 73

4.3.3 Environmental changes associated with pastoralism ......................................................... 76

4.3.4 Burning practices ............................................................................................................... 79

4.4 1960s experience of town and farms ..................................................................................... 84

4.4.1 Residence and land use around Kununurra ....................................................................... 85

4.4.2 Mobility in employment and education ............................................................................. 89

4.4.3 Summary ............................................................................................................................. 91

4.5 Contemporary land use and mobility ...................................................................................... 91

4.5.1 The outstation movement .................................................................................................. 92

4.5.2 Ceremonies and meetings .................................................................................................. 95

4.5.3 Contemporary land use practices ...................................................................................... 98

4.5.3 Outstations, land use and mobility .................................................................................... 98
4.5.4 Around Kununurra ................................................................. 102
4.5.5 Too many people................................................................. 102
4.5.6 'Too much grass' ................................................................. 103
4.5.7 Arts and crafts production ................................................... 106
4.5.7 Summary .............................................................................. 108

4.6 Conclusion .............................................................................. 111

Chapter 5: Land interests of Ord Valley farmers ................................. 115

5.1 Introduction .............................................................................. 115

5.2 Methods .................................................................................. 116

5.2 1960s – Diversion Dam and the first farms .................................. 121
  5.2.1 Economic rationalism versus 'the national interest' ..................... 122
  5.2.2 The farmers ......................................................................... 126
  5.2.3 Media reporting of the Ord Scheme ......................................... 133
  5.2.4 Summary .............................................................................. 140

5.3 1970s – Argyle Dam and failure of cotton farms ............................ 141
  5.3.1 Ord River Irrigation Area Review ........................................... 142
  5.3.2 Farmers ............................................................................... 143
  5.3.2 Media reporting ..................................................................... 148
  5.3.3 Summary .............................................................................. 151

5.4 1990s farmers ............................................................................. 152
  5.4.1 Background .......................................................................... 153
  5.4.2 Motivations and first impressions ........................................... 154
  5.4.3 Changes over time ............................................................... 156
  5.4.4 Seasonal fluctuations ............................................................ 159
PART III: CONTEMPORARY PLACE-MAKING PROCESSES

Chapter 7: Introduction to Part III

7.1 Land interests and symbolic capital

7.2 Role of boundaries in place-making processes

7.3 Spatial politics, social identifications and difference

Chapter 8: 'Authenticity' as symbolic capital in tourism and native title

8.1 Introduction

8.1.1 Authenticity and land interests of tourists and Aboriginal people

8.1.2 National parks as bounded places

8.2 Approach and methods

8.3 Authenticity as symbolic capital in tourism and Native Title

8.3.1 Authenticity in tourism

8.3.2 Authenticity in Native Title and Aboriginal Land Rights

8.4 Contemporary tourism experiences and motivations for visiting the East Kimberley

8.5 Tourism operator perspectives on cultural tourism

8.5.1 Tourism operators

8.5.2 Aboriginal perspectives on tourism

8.6 Conclusion - authenticity within grids of difference

Chapter 9: The Ord Stage Two 'Project Area' in contemporary spatial politics
## List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1</td>
<td>Summary of fieldwork conducted</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2</td>
<td>Summary information about interviewees and associated farms</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3</td>
<td>List of binary terms used in questionnaire</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4</td>
<td>Dates for gazettal of national parks in the East Kimberley</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5</td>
<td>Respondents' Demographic Characteristics</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6</td>
<td>Top Three holiday-maker classifications derived from respondents' rank order of importance</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7</td>
<td>Dominant mode of transport</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 8</td>
<td>Respondents' mean motivation scores for visiting the Kimberley by order of importance (reproduced from Waitt et al. in press). The mean motivation score was calculated by averaging respondents' scores on an attitudinal Likert scale for several questions, where 1 is 'strongly disagree' and 6 is 'strongly agree'</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 9</td>
<td>Sources of information about the Kimberley (reproduced from Waitt et al. in press). Information sources were ranked according to the scale: Rank 1 (very important), Rank 2 (slightly important) and Rank 3 (not important)</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 10</td>
<td>Framework of government policy objectives and legislation structuring the impact assessment for the Ord Stage Two Project Area</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 11</td>
<td>Contrast between the Wesfarmers/Marubeni proposal and an alternative model for Aboriginal involvement and land use in the Ord Stage Two project</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

Unless otherwise acknowledged, all photographs are attributable to the author.

Figure 1. Welcome sign greeting visitors arriving at Kununurra Airport. 1
Figure 2. View of Ord Valley looking north from Mirima National Park. 4
Figure 3. North West Australia showing location of the East Kimberley. 5
Figure 4. "The life-time-lines of non-representational theory" (Thrift 1999: 303). 13
Figure 5. "Two-way, interactive mode of investigation" (Shotter 1993: 26). 22
Figure 6. Biddy Simon, May 1998. 57
Figure 7. East Kimberley pastoral stations, Aboriginal settlements, existing irrigation area and new irrigation areas proposed for the Ord Stage Two development. 64
Figure 8. Ration camp at Ord River Station, 1938. Courtesy, Battye Library, 50202P. 69
Figure 9. Aboriginal stockmen at a cattle camp on Argyle Station 1930s, photograph, Reg Durack. Courtesy, Battye Library, 61513P. 70
Figure 10. Evidence of soil erosion due to grazing at Keep River National Park. 77
Figure 11. Grass fire on road to Wyndham. Fires from a range of sources are common occurrences during the dry season. 79
Figure 12. Kununurra town layout, 2002. Based on information from the Department of Land Administration, Western Australia. 87
Figure 13. Miriuwung women performing a public ceremony at the Women's Crisis Accommodation Centre in Kununurra, 1999. 98
Figure 14. Marralam Outstation, May 1998. 100
Figure 15. Aboriginal settlements or 'outstations' in the Ord Valley. 101
Figure 16. Road sign erected by W.A Bush Fires Authority. The use of a hand print and the red, yellow and black colours associated with the Aboriginal land rights movement indicates that the sign is directed at Aboriginal people. 103
Figure 17. Performance of Kurirr-Kurirr ceremony by Kija men in 1978. Courtesy, Kim Akerman. 107
Figure 18. Artworks by Paddy Carlton, on wall of Kununurra Police Station. Local Aboriginal youth have frequent interactions with police. 108
Figure 19. Farm locations for interviewees showing 1960s and 1990s farms. 119
Figure 20. Ploughing Pilot Farm, 1965. Courtesy Kununurra Historical Society. 122
Figure 21. Di Oliver outside her home on Ivanhoe Plain, Ord Valley 1999. 127
Figure 22. Kununurra township, January 1967. Courtesy, Kununurra Historical Society. 130
Figure 23. Advertisements by the Western Australian Department of Industrial Development in *The Australian Financial Review* in May 1963, advertising the land ballots for the Ord Irrigation Scheme and promoting development in the region to investors.

Figure 24. Advertisement promoting investment in the Ord Valley cotton industry, published in *The West Australian* in September 1963 by the Department of Industrial Development, Western Australia.

Figure 25. Spike Dessert, Ivanhoe Plain, Ord Valley, November 1998.

Figure 26. Aerial spraying of cotton crops, Ord Valley 1960s. Courtesy, Kununurra Historical Society.

Figure 27. John Mack, Ord Valley 1999.

Figure 28. Jill Parker, Packsaddle Plain, 1999.

Figure 29. Carlton Reach, Ord River 1953, prior to dam construction. Courtesy, Kununurra Historical Society.

Figure 30. Dense vegetation and cumbungi along the banks of Lake Kununurra, Ord River 1999.

Figure 31. Gordon Waitt conducting survey with tourist.

Figure 32. Image of Rock Wallaby from postcard produced by AUSCAPE PRINTS (no date).

Figure 33. Image of crocodile from AAT King’s Australian Tours Brochure.

Figure 34. Image of Parry’s Lagoon from postcard produced by AUSCAPE PRINTS (no date).

Figure 35. Tourist with barramundi fish. From travel brochure

Figure 36. Ord valley farm lands. From postcard produced by AUSCAPE PRINTS (no date).

Figure 37. Argyle Dam. From postcard produced by Red Dirt Arts (no date).

Figure 38. National parks in North West Australia

Figure 39. National parks and nature reserves in the East Kimberley

Figure 40. Brochure obtained from the Kununurra Tourist Information Centre in 1999 promoting ecotourism in the Ord Valley.

Figure 41. Wannagarti Arts, Kununurra 1999.

Figure 42. Kevin Kelly at the Red Rock Gallery, Kununurra 2001.

Figure 43. Distinctive ‘honeycomb’ rock formations in Purnululu National Park, 1999.

Figure 44. Rock art site with interpretive signage. Keep River National Park, 2001.

Figure 45. Jenny and Jeff Hayley of Triangle Tours, Kununurra, 1999.
Figure 46. The Desert Inn Backpackers, Kununurra, 1999.

Figure 47. Kenton May at the Kununurra Backpackers, Kununurra, 1999.

Figure 48. Andrew McEwan, Kununurra, 1999.

Figure 49. Responses to tourist attractions mapped onto the repertory grid.

Figure 50. Corroboree image from questionnaire.

Figure 51. Personal constructs of domestic tourists compared with those of international tourists.

Figure 52. The proposed Project Area for Ord Stage Two, showing farmlands, conservation area and Aboriginal land claims.

Figure 53. Bush meeting of Miriuwung women convened by the Northern Land Council to discuss the Ord Stage Two proposal.

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