

Foundation and continuity: Kimberley Aboriginal geopolitics

Martin Préaud



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/actesbranly/555>

DOI: 10.4000/actesbranly.555

ISSN: 2105-2735

Publisher

Musée du quai Branly Jacques Chirac

Electronic reference

Martin Préaud, « Foundation and continuity: Kimberley Aboriginal geopolitics », *Les actes de colloques du musée du quai Branly Jacques Chirac* [Online], 4 | 2014, Online since 13 June 2014, connection on 08 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/actesbranly/555> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/actesbranly.555>

This text was automatically generated on 8 September 2020.

© Tous droits réservés

Foundation and continuity: Kimberley Aboriginal geopolitics

Martin Préaud

- 1 Hello & thanks.

Introduction

- 2 Two snapshots from the 2011 KALACC Warnamirnti Festival
 - Graduation ceremony for Aboriginal Rangers from the groups developed under the KLC's LSMU and other initiatives (e.g. Yiriman) = inscribing ranger work at the heart of Kimberley Aboriginal political culture;
 - KLC's communication event: constant reference to Noonkanbah, its foundational struggle, in response to the controversies surrounding the Jabirr Jabirr claimant group signing a multi-billion dollars agreements for the development of a gas precinct at Walmadany/James Price Point
- 3 Two events that highlight the ongoing tension between environmental work, in line with international actions and concerns, and the mining activities that sustain the national Australian economy in a time of global crisis. In the Kimberley region, this tension, takes a particular form that I call the Noonkanbah paradox: how can a historical conflict where Aboriginal people totally rejected mining on sacred ground be taken by an organisation born in this conflict as a foundation for negotiating mining agreements? It certainly makes for a strange continuity.
- 4 In terms of this session title 'sustainable environment and new economies' the Noonkanbah paradox begs the question: what kind of sustainability for what kind of an economy? Another way to put it is to ask where the Kimberley Aboriginal political movement is headed?

- 5 To answer these questions, we need to put current development in Aboriginal natural and cultural resources management activities into historical perspective. I intend to do so here by combining two approaches:
- A geopolitical perspective that analyses systems of actors and representations at various levels of analysis (I will here focus on the regional, national and international levels);
 - And a perspective informed by Frances Morphy's model of Aboriginal sociality in the Fitzroy Valley area as one that is grounded in mobility and anchored in networks of places and networks of peoples (Morphy 2009).
 - Combining these perspectives allows to see geographical levels of analysis are not hierarchically organised but are rather levels of territoriality (place-making + patterns of mobility) that are topologically connected.
- 6 Using these tools, my aim here is to trace a genealogy of current Aboriginal involvement in sustainable development that allows to see how it is not only a reaction to changing constraints imposed and proposed by the settler State but is also the result of the operation of local Aboriginal institutions, socialities and political culture. I will focus on three moments and places in the recent history of the Kimberley (i.e. from the last century and a half) to try to outline the historical trajectory of aboriginal political movements in this particular region.
- 7 One of the foundations of and trigger for this presentation is this map presented in the Kimberley Aboriginal Caring for Country Plan, developed between Aboriginal regional organizations, rangers groups and the university of Notre-Dame through its Nulungu Centre for Aboriginal Studies. The map presents the main cultural blocs (a term borrowed from the anthropological literature on the Western Desert) through which caring for country as well as Law and Culture is negotiated between Aboriginal groups. It is a map that defies previous ethnographic and linguistic descriptions and hints at something that is rarely seen or discussed: that there are power relations and political struggles within Aboriginal institutions (or the customary sector) and that they operate through networks of alliances which use organizations and communities as nodes and points both of power and emergence. In effect this presentation aims to explain how such a representation of the Kimberley Aboriginal political field came to be so represented as well as effective.

Sheep and Cattle Settlement: displacement

- 8 *Unique position* of the Kimberley region in the national political economy and environment, geopolitical characteristics of the that bear on its trajectory and situation =
- Diversity people, language, culture and country but linked through networks of exchange
 - Far removed from settlers' places of power
- 9 One of the last areas to be settled, after first successful walkthrough by a white man = A. Forrest 1879 (great great uncle of Twiggy Forrest). A place still removed from Perth and Canberra (hence the 'seagull syndrome' = defiance towards fly-in bureaucrats)
- 10 *Settlement process* =
- allotment and distribution of land through pastoral leases (sheep and cattle).

- Linked to local conditions (natural resources in the form of abundant grassland and labour) articulated to wider considerations:
 - Economic and political independence of the colony (founded on an ill-chosen site and deprived of convict labour mid 1860s)
 - Economy of the British empire
- 11 *Impact on Aboriginal people and countries : From prison to labour*
- Death (disease, shooting and massacres, deportation)
 - Massive displacement and movement (mostly forced but also voluntary as in the great migration of people out of the desert)
 - Ecological impacts on Aboriginal countries: unattended countries, imported ecosystem and struggle against local conditions and populations.
 - See map: colonial institutions follow the appropriation of land either outside (to remove hostile populations) or within pastoral areas (to use their labour) = places where aboriginal population were supposed to establish themselves and remain (the Act preventing movement and free circulation)
 - However, the colonial system in the Kimberley, after the initial and violent confrontation, amounted more to a form of what historians have described as “impoverished neglect” where the colonial discipline could not be absolutely enforced, leaving room to manoeuvre for Aboriginal people, especially in terms of circulation on Country for those people who were enrolled in the workforce on pastoral stations. The term “outstation” that is used to describe the homeland movement comes directly from pastoral work and practice. In many ways, the moving out of stations after the Award wages decision at the end of the 1960s had a greater effect in terms of sedentarization of Aboriginal population, at least until people could afford to buy their own vehicles and obtain to establish their own communities.
- 12 One of the key places of that era is the establishment of the government station of **Moola Bulla** (but there is also Beagle Bay): a government station to reduce costly incarceration rates + place for the relocation of stolen children. Evacuated overnight in 1955 and moved to the Fitzroy Crossing mission (assimilation policy)
- = a core place for the transformation of Aboriginal networks and what may be described provocatively as a creolization process, where creolization designates: « this series of changes that are due to the displacement of populations, the mingling of different cultures, their moulding under the heavy constraints of colonial society, and the emergence of a specific society (Benoist 1996: 118) .7

Communities and organizations: creolization

- 13 Transformation of Aboriginal networks: fewer people on country, places of higher population density
- Migration out of the desert towards the fringes in all direction, including the river country of the Kimberley, extension of the 8 skin kinship system as a common reference throughout the region, Walmajarri used as a *lingua franca*, circulation of new initiatory cults between desert groups (Akerman’s ring of fire).
 - New alliances and relations between people (and countries) that had not been directly connected previously, particularly in places for mixed-descent people (Beagle Bay, Moola Bulla, Swan River, etc.),

- These new social entities became visible after the Award wages decision and the first phase of people going back to country to escape their impoverishment near towns, establishing communities and outstations on the basis of the communities they had formed within colonial institutions.
- These communities are integrated into a network that has profoundly changed because of greater distances between places: the network exchange has taken a more collective character as described by Kolig about religious practice by and as shown in the network of trade drawn by Akerman in the late 1970s = from relations between individual people anchored in specific places to relations between communities. But while Kolig argued for a change in consciousness I would rather insist on the adaptation of Aboriginal practice to changed conditions (see also Widlok's, Glowczewski's and Poirier's works on nomadic rituals).

14 **Noonkanbah:** Emergence of a regional political identity

- These changes in aboriginal networks of alliance and trade fuelled by the migration out of the desert, but also changes in patterns of mobility, amount to a process of creolization insofar as they have resulted in the emergence of a regional political identity, despite the initial diversity of groups, people and circumstances. What brings people together at this time is a common experience of settlement, displacement and disconnection. A different society is born out of this historical trauma, although it is never expressed as such. The Kriol may be the main aboriginal language spoken in the region, it is not the support of new identities. Creolization in Aboriginal terms is rather expressed in the 2 way paradigm, the acknowledgement of difference as the foundation for relation.
- These new societies born of the settlement history, represent themselves publicly for the first time during the Noonkanbah dispute at the end of the 1970s, which is also the moment when the first grass-roots aboriginal regional organization was founded, the Kimberley Land Council, inspired by the institutions established in the Northern Territory after the 1976 *Aboriginal Land Rights Act*.
- The Noonkanbah dispute, a conflict over mining on sacred land, represents the beginning of modern Aboriginal politics in the Kimberley in the sense:
 - That it uses non-Aboriginal processes of representation and is fuelled by cooperation with non-racist whites (Kowal)
 - That it creates or renders visible a new political identity "Kimberley Aboriginal people" that will be sustained by two other regional organisations (KALACC, KLRC)
 - That it operates at different levels:
 - Regional and national (Western Australian) through elections, political mobilisation through strikes and walk-offs
 - National (Commonwealth) by sending delegates to the newly formed National Aboriginal Consultative Committee
 - International by sending delegates to international conferences of indigenous peoples and to forums on indigenous rights with the United Nations system (Noonkanbah is, to the best of my knowledge the cause of the first aboriginal delegation to the palace of Nations in Geneva).
- In the 1970s and 1980s, through the era that is sometimes described as self-determination (although the notion as applied in Australia should be taken with a lot of caution), community organisations have become the main vehicle for political engagement and involvement in the Kimberley as in the rest of Aboriginal Australia. They have become places in the strong sense of the term, and incorporated into Aboriginal networks of sociability, mobility and power relations.

- In effect, aboriginal organisations incorporated under the *Aboriginal Communities and Associations Act 1976* have become the point of articulation between State processes and policies of recognition and Aboriginal institutions. But the important point here is that this articulation was not fully thought through. In particular it proceeded from idealized notions of what Aboriginal cultures and societies were, not taking into account the transformations at work within aboriginal societies - in terms of demography, mobility and changing relations of power -, resulting in ambivalent results to say the least.
- This is even more obvious when we consider the new political phase in the Kimberley opened by the adoption of the Native Title Act 1993, the only land rights process available for Aboriginal people of Western Australian, and the one on which recent developments in sustainable management are founded.

Native Title: re-territorialisation

- From the award wages decision, going back to country and securing recognition of Aboriginal people as authorities over the management and development of their countries, has been a major focus of political activity. In Western Australia, in the absence of land rights legislation, this process of re-territorialisation was permitted through the activism of the Kimberley Land Council as well as federal support and negotiated settlements through the Aboriginal Lands Trust.
- The adoption of the Native Title Act in 1993 opened a whole new era for political activity in the Kimberley – 80% of the Kimberley being subject to native title claims (with 45% already determined in favour of claimants). In particular, the preparation of land claims has been crucial for allowing people to physically go back to countries that they had not been able to visit for a long time, particularly in remote desert areas.
- However, native title processes do not amount to full title and they have profound impacts on aboriginal sociality through a regime of what Patrick Wolfe calls “repressive authenticity”, that is the necessity for claimant groups to conform to anthropological fantasies as formalised in juridical processes (Povinelli’s cunning of recognition, Debbie Roses’s deep colonialism). As such, native title processes participate to a fragmentation of Aboriginal identities and is a major source of conflict and violence within Aboriginal societies because they deny the effective historical and sociological processes of change, adaptation and transformation that I have outlined previously.
- On another level, the Native Title Act has also profoundly transformed Aboriginal postcolonial institutions, especially the Kimberley Land Council; in fact, its transformation into a Native Title Representative Body and incorporation into the operation of the Native Title Act are at the core of the current conundrum at James Price Point (see also Patrick Sullivan’s recent work).
- In many ways, native title captures Aboriginal processes of territorialisation and transforms them into something that is less flexible and dynamic, more controllable by State administrations. But they are also the main basis on which natural and cultural resources management programs can be developed. And while the native title regime is regularly condemned at the international level, sustainable management of country is promoted as an example of good practice at the national and international level. Indeed, the IPA process may be one of the rare areas in which the Australian Government is able to implement Free Prior and Informed Consent as it is understood in international law and in particular in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; the cynical point of view would be to

say that it is only because IPA processes are conditioned by the recognition of Native Title which is the opposite of FPIC and negotiation in good faith.

- It is interesting in this regard to observe that the impulse for the development of land management activities by Aboriginal people in the Kimberley came from the community of Jarlmadangah, where land tenure is secured through a pastoral lease, rather than from a determined native title area. And it is even more interesting to see how the Jarlmadangah initiative has first been developed through the KALACC rather than the KLC, even when the KLC had set up its Land and Sea Management Unit and even though the main leader at Jarlmadangah is a former director of KLC and one of its permanent special advisors. Interestingly, prominent figures from this community have also been among the strongest advocates for the negotiation of a mining agreement at James Price Point, arguing that it is a necessary condition for true their self-determination.

15 In terms of geopolitics, the development of aboriginal ranger groups in the Kimberley crystallizes the convergence of processes operating at different levels of analysis:

- International: alliance between ecological NGOs and Indigenous movements, developing the idea that Indigenous peoples throughout the world are the custodians of biodiversity and Mother Earth; willingness of the Australian State to appear as a promoter of indigenous rights.
- National:
 - incorporation of aboriginal socialities and activities into the market economy, promotion of sustainable development through a paradigm of private property/ownership rather than relation: “Caring for Our Country” rather than Caring for Country
 - mimetic processes between regions, construction of a national network of aboriginal land managers (C4C conference), building up towards an international network
- Local/regional: existence of 2 way leaders in the region, proven capacity to work through regional networks, close connexion to country as recognised through Native Title and other processes + representation of environmental work as inscribed in a long-term continuity of people caring for country through ritual and mobility.
- The convergence of these processes goes some way to explain the successful development of NCRM activities on aboriginal land in the last fifteen years, but because it is based on opportunistic alliances it also raises the question of their sustainability and economic viability: the number of jobs created remain relatively small and there are ongoing concerns as to the long-term funding of the Working on Country program by the federal State. In a sense, this development resembles that of the painting movement as an economic niche for Aboriginal people living in remote areas and still actively involved in what some describe as a customary sector of the economy. Although the work in itself is directed towards sustainability, its economic basis may not be, even more so given the ongoing push for:
 - A mode of development in remote areas closely articulated to mining activities, perhaps especially in WA
 - The relocation of aboriginal people from remote communities and outstations towards better serviced urban areas.

16 **CCL:**

Noonkanbah paradox = Choiceless decisions: the permanence of the political economy of the Australian State

17 In this presentation, I have attempted to outline the particular historicity in which current ‘Caring for Country’ activities are inscribed. I have argued that it is necessary to build a political history of Aboriginal organisations both in relation to Australian

governments and in relation to Aboriginal institutions enshrined in patterns of mobility, exchange and sociality.

- 18 Going back to the title of this presentation, I would argue that the strongest continuity at work here is not so much situated within Aboriginal political practice (although there are continuities that should be taken seriously) but rather in the political economy of the settler State (Western Australia) which continues to see Aboriginal people and their Countries as resources that can be put in determined boundaries, appropriated and commodified, rather than as relations and interlocutors. The fact that the Commonwealth government acts differently - sometimes, and in very specific areas - goes some way to explain how Aboriginal organisations find themselves in situations of choiceless decisions so characteristic of the ongoing struggle and drama at Walmadany/James Price Point.
 - 19 Thank you for your attention.
-

AUTHOR

MARTIN PRÉAUD

LAIOS-ERC SOGIP