

The ideal and the real: cultural and personal transformations of archaeological research on Groote Eylandt, northern Australia

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Abstract

Since the early 1970s indigenous people have provided a challenging and often confronting cultural and political critique of some of the long-held givens of archaeological research. Archaeologists engaged in research about Australia's indigenous archaeological record, whether it is the distant past of the Pleistocene or the more immediate past of colonial conquest, have had to rethink some of the fundamental aspects of their practice. In the last ten years one important initiative has been the development of community-based approaches to archaeology. The paper is presented in two parts. The first part provides a brief background to the development of community archaeology in Australia, setting out the main elements of this approach. The second part presents three contexts from Groote Eylandt in northern Australia where I am able to identify the experiences that were pivotal in my shift in practice to a community-based archaeology.

Keywords

Community archaeology; indigenous archaeology; cross-cultural interactions; Groote Eylandt; northern Australia.

In the late twentieth century, researchers have been required to realise that their understanding emerges from their engagements with their subjects of study. Whether the impetus comes from quantum physics, from radical feminism, or from the demands of colonised peoples, the issue is the same: for better and for worse, the 'observers' are part of the systems they study.

Reflexive anthropology . . . can be traced in part to the fact that the subjects of study have started talking back, demanding to be taken seriously on their own terms, demanding accountability, and demanding reciprocal relationships with the people and institutions who have studied them.

(Rose 1993: 6)

Introduction

Since the early 1970s indigenous people in Australia have provided a challenging and often confronting cultural and political critique of some of the long-held givens of archaeological research (e.g. Kelly 1975; Langford 1983; Fourmile 1989; Murphy 1996). Indigenous people have demanded to be given legislative control over their own cultural heritage, in terms not only of the physical management of land and sites but also of authorizing research activities. In response, archaeologists engaged in research about Australia's indigenous archaeological record, whether it is the distant past of the Pleistocene or the more immediate past of colonial conquest, have had to rethink some of the fundamental aspects of their practice. What was once a relatively unproblematic field, in which archaeologists enjoyed autonomous research access to landscapes, sites, artefact collections and archival data, is now a contested and shifting arena. There are ongoing debates over rights to control both the material remains of the past and the structures of their curation and management (Langford 1983; Bowdler 1988, 1992; Mulvaney 1991; McGowan 1996; Murray 1996; TALC 1996). Three decades of negotiation with indigenous people, organizations and communities, at a collective disciplinary level and through the efforts of individuals, government organizations and research groups, have resulted in the continuing transformation of research practices.

The development of research strategies designed to meet indigenous concerns about the practice of archaeology can be seen to have two interlinked aims: first, to work towards achieving informed consent to practice and, second, to establish meaningful processes of involvement and interaction between archaeological practitioners and indigenous people. In the last ten years one important initiative has been the development of community-based approaches to archaeology (Smith 1994; Davidson et al. 1995; Greer 1996; Clarke 2000a; Ross and Coghill 2000). In Australia it can be argued that the development of community archaeology has been driven by an ideology of practice that actively acknowledges the reflexive and socio-political nature of archaeological research (pace Rose 1993 above; Greer 1996; Ross and Coghill 2000). Coupled with a desire to make research practice more accountable, relevant and interesting for the communities in which it takes place, community approaches have also arisen as very personal and practical responses to specific field contexts.

This paper is drawn from my doctoral (1991 and 1992) and post-doctoral fieldwork (1995 and 1996) when I spent a total of twenty-two months living at Angurugu, Umbakumba and number of bush camps on Groote Eylandt in northern Australia (Figs 1–3). The aim is to show how the development of a community approach to archaeology was integral to the transmutation of my research from a basic culture-historical project aimed at establishing a cultural and chronological regional sequence to one concerned with negotiated landscapes of cross-cultural engagement (Clarke 2000a, 2000b). The transformation of the Groote Eylandt project occurred at two levels: first, through the interactions I had with indigenous people as I negotiated the form and content of my research and, second, as a result of the way in which my interest in old people's camping places was interpreted by people in terms of their indigenous cultural and historical landscape.

The paper is presented in two parts. The first part provides a brief background to the

development of community archaeology in Australia, setting out the main elements of this approach. The second part presents three contexts from Groote Eylandt where I am able to identify the experiences that were pivotal in my shift in practice to a community-based archaeology.

Some elements of community archaeology

For archaeologists of the current generation who have been trained under legislative frameworks that protect and manage cultural sites, community consultation has become a routine and accepted part of professional practice. The government agencies responsible for the management of indigenous cultural heritage in all States and Territories require archaeologists to consult with indigenous people and organizations prior to carrying out field-based projects (Creamer 1983; Rose and Lewis 1984; Sullivan 1985; Davidson et al. 1995). Today, archaeologists negotiate with indigenous organizations for permission to carry out field research and indigenous community representatives are often employed as assistants during fieldwork. Recognition of the relationship between archaeology, archaeologists and indigenous people has been formalized in the Australian Archaeology Association's (AAA) Code of Ethics (Davidson 1991), which lays down a series of guidelines governing the interactions between the researcher and the host community. Community-based archaeology is an attempt to move beyond consultation as the primary and sole process of negotiating research access. It aims to encompass approaches that include community members in decision making about research topics, research sites, analysis of data, curation and management of collections and the production of materials that are culturally appropriate and useful.

With my research on Groote Eylandt and more recently in Blue Mud Bay, also in eastern Arnhem Land (Fig. 1), I have attempted to develop community approaches to archaeological research. There are several components that I consider integral to a community-based approach. How these manifest on the ground will differ from community to community and from project to project. The character of a community-based project will circle around a diverse, unpredictable and sometimes indefinable range of factors. These may include highly personal aspects such as the motivations and individual ideologies of project members together with the aspirations and commitments of individuals and social groupings within a community. The form and directions of a community-based archaeology are likely to be structured by the stimulus and rationale for the work: is it community-driven, initiated by researchers or part of an environmental impact assessment process? The local history and experience of interactions with non-indigenous society together with the structure of a community and its representative organizations may also play an important role in determining how a project will be shaped.

In a community approach, consultation and the negotiation of research access are only the first stages. The premise behind a community approach is that research is a negotiated process and that the boundaries and components of a project are open to reassessment and re-negotiation by any of the parties involved. The research goals and the mechanisms needed to achieve those goals are also negotiated. Another fundamental constituent of a community approach is that it acknowledges the subversion of power

relations between the representatives of the dominant culture carrying out the research and the indigenous minority which is the subject of the research. In this shift of power relations the researcher acknowledges the right of the community to stop or change the research at any point. A community approach is not merely one of courtesy, as in a host/guest relationship, it is an explicit restructuring of power relations and a political recognition of the rights of the communities to have a role in directing how research about their lives (past or present) is conducted. Finally, an important component of a community approach is the return and distillation of research results in formats that are intelligible to a non-specialist audience, culturally appropriate and useful and informative in a community context.

In addition to the conceptual framework outlined above there are other elements that, from a personal perspective, are equally important in constructing a community-based project. For me, it is an archaeology of lived experience, grounded in people, in relationships and in the land. Working in indigenous communities in remote parts of northern Australia, I have come to learn how land embodies clan and kin relations, how it provides the resources for everyday living and how it contains all those facets of cultural and historical knowledge, including the material remains of the past, integral to the maintenance of cultural identity and being (Rose 1996). In pragmatic terms my personal practice of community-based archaeology means that I like to spend several months at a time living in a community, participating in the activities and events of everyday life, building relationships and learning about culture. Reciprocity and demand sharing (Peterson 1993) are such important parts of indigenous social relations that, in return for the generosity of allowing me time and space in community life, my contribution tends to be in the form of resources that people struggling to live on government pensions can ill afford. These resources include payment for work, driving people to town for shopping or to visit the doctor, providing fuel for trucks and boats, taking the project truck out on hunting and camping trips, fixing tyres and sharing food, medicines, tools and other useful equipment. In this context archaeological activities become part of daily social practice, somewhat removed from the romanticized myth that archaeological fieldwork is characterized by the disengaged and objective collection of data.

The study area

Groote Eylandt is located in northern Australia on the western side of the Gulf of Carpentaria about 40km from the east Arnhem Land coast (Fig. 1). It is about 630km east of Darwin, the capital city of the Northern Territory of Australia. The archipelago contains over one hundred islands, ranging in size from rocky outcrops tens of metres across, to substantial islands, such as Bickerton Island.

In the very recent past the indigenous population experienced contact with two different groups of outsiders. The first set of encounters involved a seasonal bartering relationship with Indonesian trepang (*bêche de mer*) fishing fleets from the city state of Macassar in southern Sulawesi, historically recorded from around 1690 onwards (MacKnight 1976). The Macassan visits to northern Australia ceased in 1907 when the Australian Government declared the northern coast off limits to the Indonesian fleets

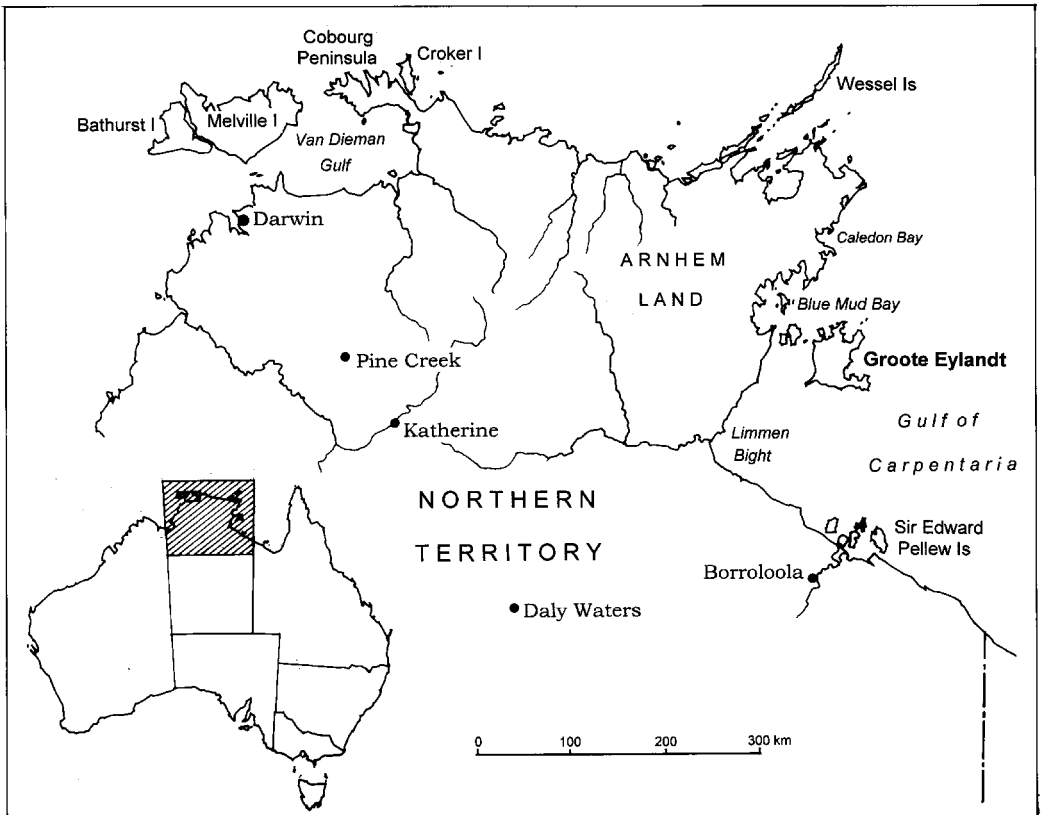


Figure 1 Location of the study area.

(Macknight 1976). The second set of encounters was the prolonged and continuing engagement with European colonial/settler society. This began sporadically in the nineteenth century and became permanent in 1921 when a mission was established by the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) on the Emerald River (Warren [1918] in Macknight 1969: 186–203; Cole 1971: 20–8; Dewar 1992: 13). In the 1960s a manganese mine and associated infrastructure including a mining town were established on the western coast of the island.

Today, there are three towns on Groote Eylandt (Fig. 2). Most indigenous people live either at Angurugu, the former CMS mission or at Umbakumba, a settlement established in 1938. People also live at a number of outstations in clan territories. The third town on Groote Eylandt is the mining town of Alyangula where most of the non-indigenous population resides.

An archaeological apprenticeship

The experience of learning how to live in an indigenous community and the steps I went through in working out how best to communicate my research aims were instrumental in

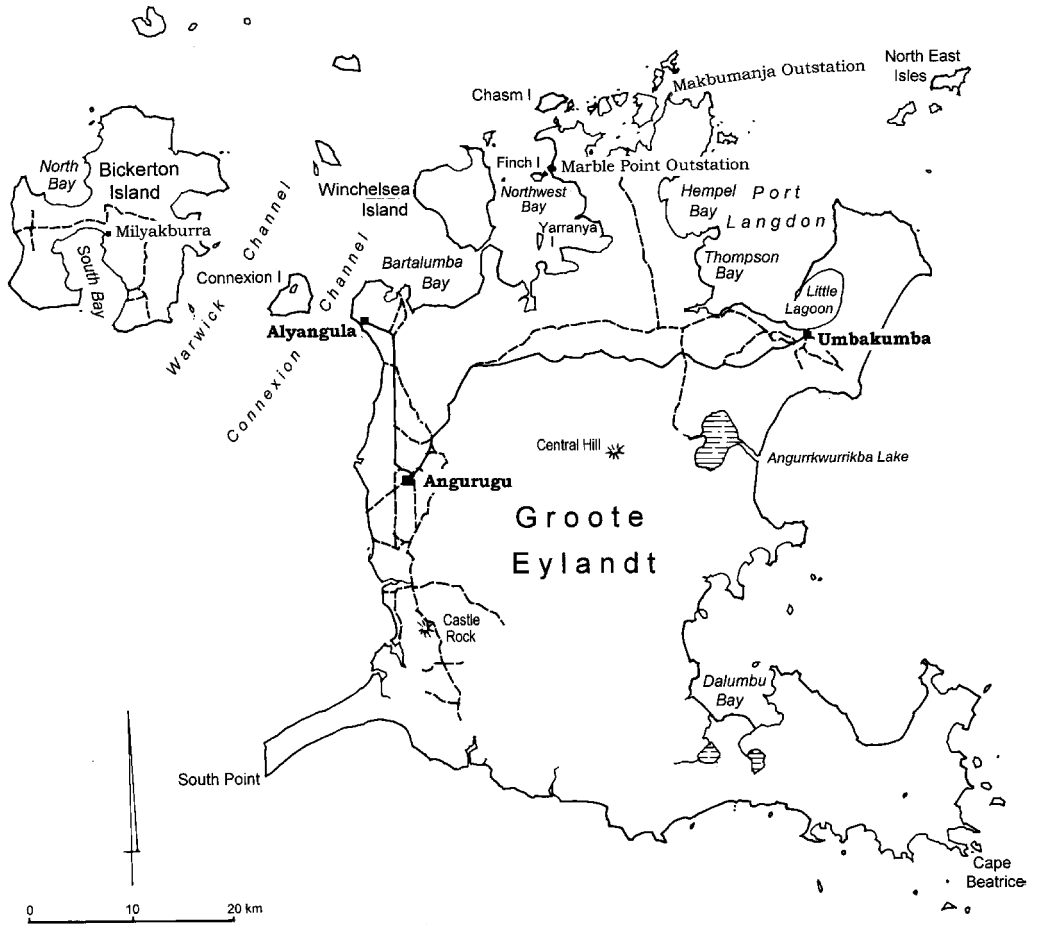


Figure 2 Groote Eylandt.

the development of a community-based approach to archaeology on Groote Eylandt. To identify the loci of these formative experiences I have organized the following narrative under three headings – communication, archaeology as part of social practice and cultural transformations.

Communication

I arrived to start my doctoral research at Angurugu in late March 1991. I had visited Groote Eylandt briefly the year before and had obtained consent to live there and to do some research. As the first act in negotiating permission to start fieldwork I went to Community Council meetings at both Angurugu and Umbakumba. At these meetings I was introduced to some of the clan leaders and other senior men and was told for which areas of land each was responsible. For my part, I explained how I was interested in

looking at old people's camping places to study the history of Groote Eylandt before the time of missionaries and before the visits of the Macassans. I stressed that I wished to camp out at places with the relevant landowner and their family members so I could be guided as to where I could or could not go. I was also careful to emphasize in these early meetings that I did not want to disturb any burials or sacred places.

These meetings with the Community Councils took three weeks to set up. At first I was worried by my apparently slow progress when, after nearly a month in the field, I had seen few archaeological sites let alone started excavating. From my previous archaeological experience a month seemed like such a long period of time. In addition, it began to rain and continued to do so for about three weeks, making some areas of the island inaccessible. As a result, I spent my first month on Groote Eylandt in and around Angurugu, visiting sites in locations accessible to the non-indigenous public but making very little contact with Aboriginal families. By the end of the first month I finally went out with men from the Bara clan who showed me the Makbumanja area on the North West peninsula (Fig. 3) where I recorded some midden sites and carried out a small test excavation.

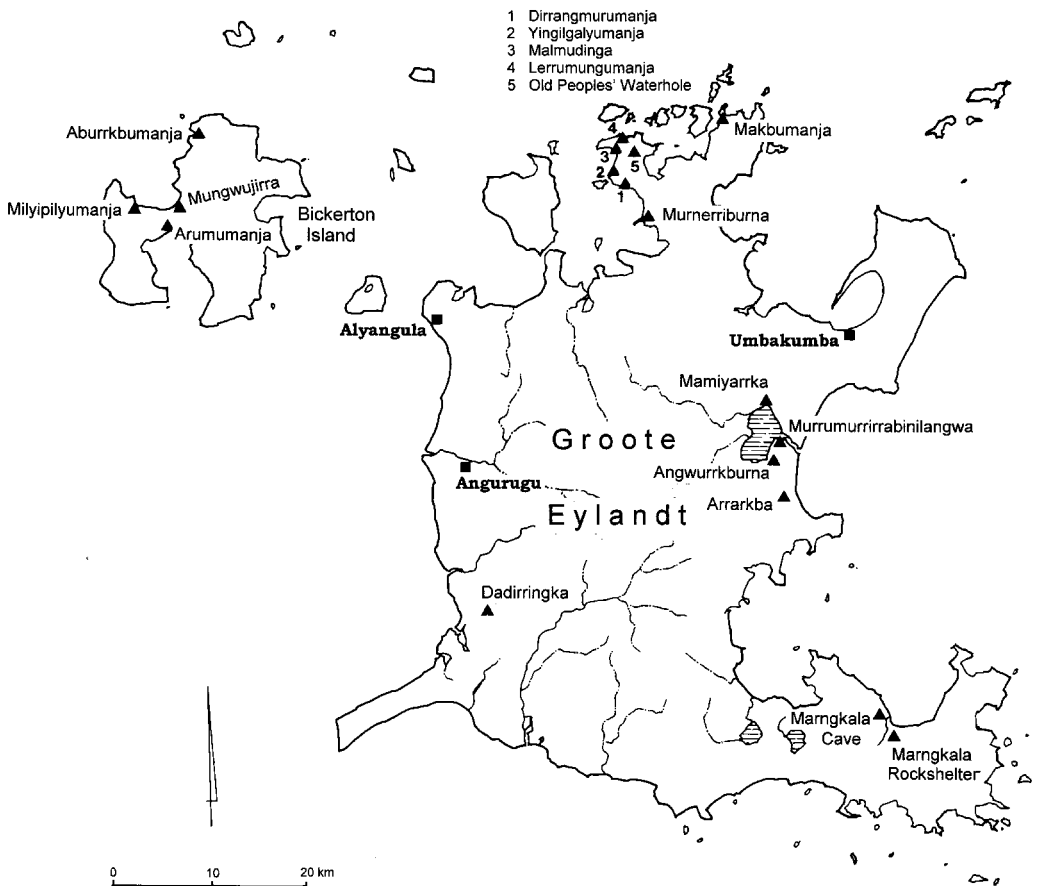


Figure 3 Sites excavated on Groote Eylandt 1991–2.

After this first period of work I found it easier to approach people in the community and to introduce myself. By then I also had in my possession photographs of shell middens, rock shelters and the excavation at Makbumanja. I found that the photographs made it much easier to explain to people what I wanted to do. In the two months following my first fieldwork at Makbumanja I met the four families (those of Isaac Barabara and Hazel Lalara, Mary Amagula and Paul Lalara, Nabi Yantarrnga and Polly Mamarika and Claude Mamarika) with whom I have since established close working and personal relationships (Plates 1–3).

During those first months on Groote Eylandt I also decided to write short community reports to give to people after each field trip. I typed up a three- or four-page summary of where we went and what we did and inserted photographs throughout the text. I gave one report to each family a few days after we returned from a camping trip. This proved to be a highly successful method of communicating and a way of giving something back in return for people's time and effort in taking me out into their country. I began to realize how important it was to think about and to enact effective communication strategies in cross-cultural situations where English is spoken as a second or even third language and where literacy levels may be limited. The positive way people responded to these short reports also gave me an understanding of how reciprocity could be manifested in situations where the traditional practice has been for researchers to extract information and material from places without paying much attention to offering anything tangible in return. I have subsequently tried to develop these practices further.



Plate 1 Mary Amagula excavating at Daddirringka.

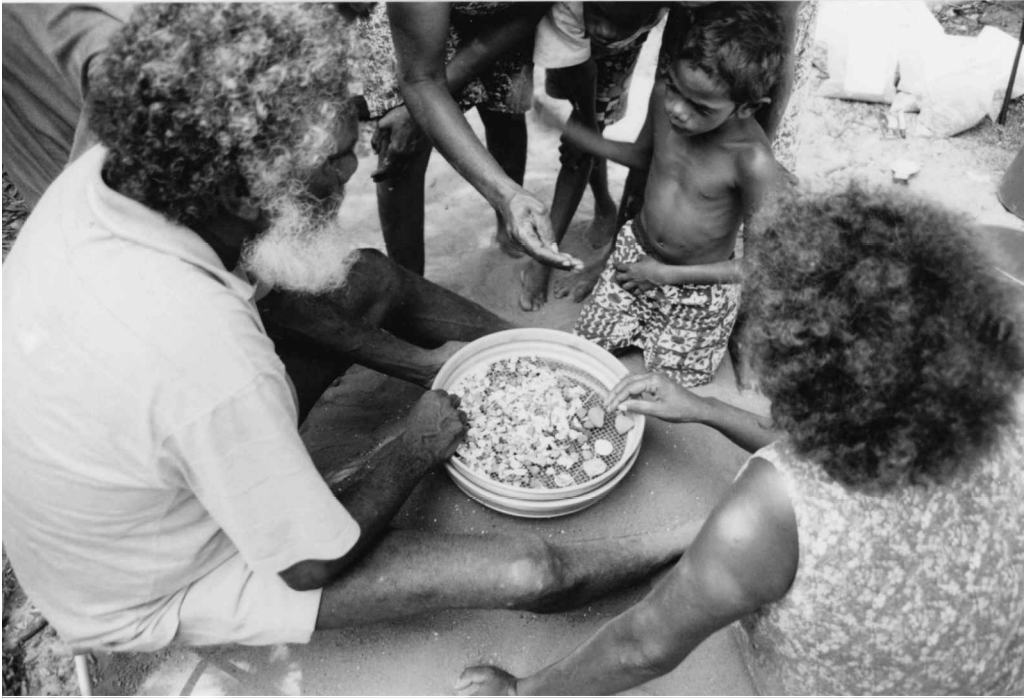


Plate 2 Claude Mamarika showing the children how to sieve.

Just before I left Angurugu in October 1991 I made a poster using a piece of A2 cardboard, photographs and a brief plain English text explaining my research and thanking all those who had helped me (Clarke 1995). I put the poster up outside the council office where people queued to get their unemployment payments and pension cheques. I went over on 'pension day' and saw people looking at the poster and talking about it as they waited for their money. I have continued to do this as a way of communicating and, after putting up a poster at the Umbakumba School in 1996, I realized how much notice people took of these small gestures to feed back information. One afternoon a group of women were sitting on the school verandah talking among themselves while waiting for their children. As I walked past they called me over and began to show the poster to me, telling me what I had done, where I had visited and who I had gone with, all the time relating this to their own connections to particular areas of country. I now prepare plain English community reports after each field season to give back results and to express some sense of the shared experiences of fieldwork. While I am staying in the community I also make up photograph albums to give to people when I get films developed.

Archaeology as part of social practice

When I look back at the diaries I kept for the eight months I spent on Groote Eylandt in 1991, I realize how little time I actually spent doing 'fieldwork'. In all, I spent about three

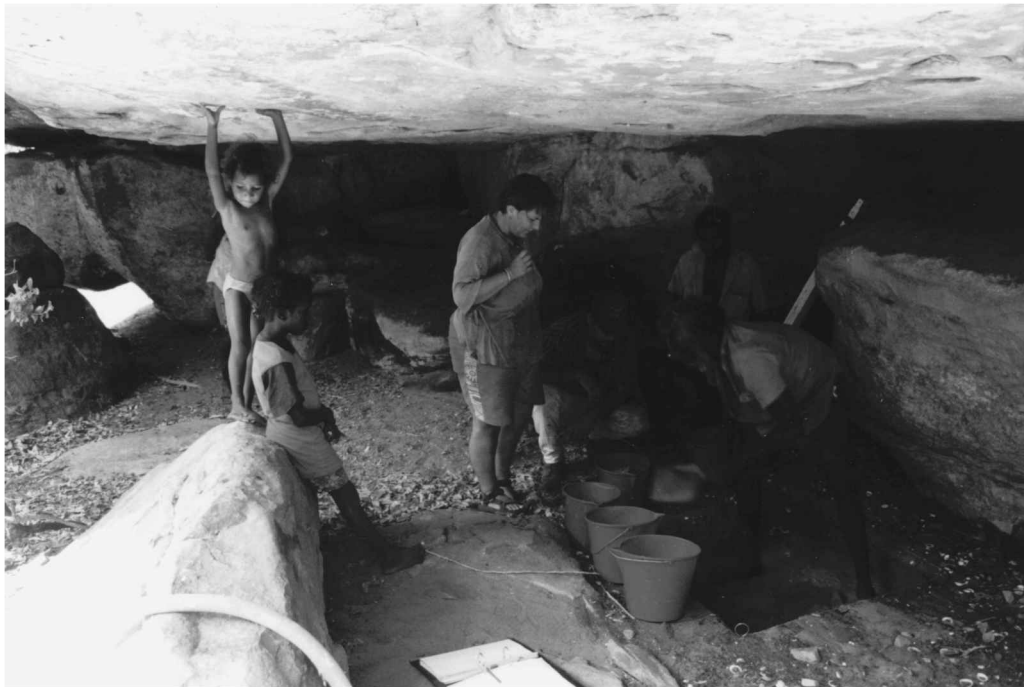


Plate 3 Nabi Yantarrnga excavating at Ayuwawa.

months away from Angurugu documenting and excavating sites. The rest of the time was spent in the community waiting to talk to people and making arrangements for people to accompany me on field trips away from town. The indigenous families who took me to their clan lands often did not have large amounts of time to spend away from town. When we went camping it usually meant that people took time off from their normal community life and activities. For example, when we first visited an area called Marngkala in the far south east of Groote Eylandt (Fig. 2) Mary Amagula had to get permission to take her children out of school for that period so they could come with us. On other occasions people temporarily left community employment schemes to help me with my fieldwork.

Many weekends were spent with family groups on day or overnight camping and fishing trips. These excursions did not involve any formal data-gathering activities but were important in terms of building and strengthening social relationships. Through these social outings I learnt how to behave in an indigenous bush camp: where to sleep in terms of my social relationships to people, how to build fires, to look for sand crabs for bait, fish using a hand reel, gather shellfish from different habitats and to make tea and damper the same way that indigenous people did. It turned out that my willingness to learn how to do these tasks differently (albeit rather clumsily on most occasions) was a new experience for families who had been on picnics and camping trips with non-indigenous people where everything was done the 'whitefella' way. One evening, as we drove home, Mary reiterated to me all the indigenous activities that she and her family had taught me: how to make a fire, collect shellfish, make tea and damper, build a bush shelter. Later in the year

during a different camping trip, another group of indigenous people drove past our beach camp on the way to go fishing and they asked Mary what did I do, where did I sleep and what did I eat? She told them that I was just doing what they did, eating the same foods and sleeping around their fire. These patterns of everyday life became part of archaeological field trips and doing archaeology became part of daily social practice on the beach.

For the first two field seasons on Groote Eylandt (1991 and 1992) I worked on my own without assistance from other archaeologists. All the field surveys and excavations were done with the help of the relevant indigenous landowner and their family members (Plates 1–3). I had considered taking other archaeologists with me, but decided that having another non-indigenous person with me in the field might disrupt the relationships that I had begun to build. We established patterns of work quite different from those that tend to operate on more conventional field projects.

On Groote Eylandt fieldwork meant setting up beach camps away from town for two to three weeks. The camps were made up of extended family groups (five to forty people) and involved foraging for food on a daily basis as well as doing archaeological fieldwork. We organized the archaeology around subsistence activities rather than the reverse, working each day for only a few hours in the morning. We were often camped a few kilometres away from the sites being investigated. We would get up just after dawn and make some tea and breakfast before heading off to the site for a few hours of work. Some people would help me work and others would go looking for food. At lunchtime we returned to camp to eat the fish, turtle eggs or other food collected during the morning. In the late afternoons everyone would disperse to go food gathering again: fishing, collecting shellfish or turtle eggs, digging for yams, looking for bush honey ('sugar bag') and hunting turtles, kangaroos or flying foxes. In the early evening we would stock up on firewood for the night ahead, cook, make damper and tea and settle down around the campfire.

Archaeological research carried out in an indigenous community will inevitably be structured according to cultural events and processes rather than a timetable based on textbook approaches to fieldwork. An example that highlights the different characteristics of fieldwork in an indigenous community is what happens when there is a death. On Groote Eylandt, when someone dies, parts of the island are closed to both indigenous and non-indigenous residents until funeral ceremonies are completed. This restriction applies to the deceased person's clan lands and to their favourite camping and fishing places. The length of time that the land is closed varies according to the status of the person and sometimes the manner of their death. For example, when one important elderly man died, access to the entire south east of the island was restricted for two years. This closure is to allow the spirit of the deceased person to be sung across their totemic landscape during the funeral ceremony. Part of the ceremony also involves relatives returning to the clan lands and the camping places of the deceased person to 'smoke' and cleanse the country with fires. After this, restrictions on access are lifted.

Twice in 1991, while I was camped out with families in the bush, deaths occurred in one of the Aboriginal towns. On each occasion relatives of the deceased person drove out to our camp to bring us back into town so that the country could be closed and proper arrangements for the funeral ceremonies could begin. Once this involved packing up our camp at ten in the evening and in returning to Angurugu after three in the morning. When country was closed, I had to change my fieldwork plans, either arranging to visit other

areas or remaining in town until funeral ceremonies were completed and the country was opened up again. Each time this happened I was asked whether I had finished doing what I needed to do and people apologized to me for asking me to leave. On both occasions we had just completed an excavation. Although there was further fieldwork that needed to be undertaken, I was able to make it clear that I respected the cultural protocols in relation to the closure of land and that I would ask to come back at a later date when ceremonial obligations were completed. In the case of the Marngkala area, I was unable to return there until 1995 because the area was still closed a year later when I went back to Groote Eylandt in 1992.

In textbook approaches to archaeology, fieldwork constraints tend to be framed in terms of difficulties of physical access or problems of ground surface visibility. Often our research questions and field methodologies are based on the assumption that there is the potential to sample all components of the landscape. Working with indigenous people in their own land, constraints on access are more likely to be cultural in nature.

Cultural transformations

My original research proposal for the Groote Eylandt project was to carry out a culture historical study of the sort that has become a tradition within Australian archaeology (Murray and White 1981). Underlying my original proposal was the notion that I would find and excavate one or two key sites to set up a long chronological and cultural sequence of human occupation much in the vein of Carmel Schrire's pioneering research in western Arnhem Land in the 1960s (Schrire 1982). Even choosing Groote Eylandt as the focus of the research was part of this traditional approach. Very little archaeological research had been carried out on Groote Eylandt and my proposal offered the chance to engage in what has become colloquially known as 'cowboy archaeology'. These exploratory projects are seen as the keys to presenting the continental history of indigenous settlement (Golson 1986; McBryde 1986). By the time I had returned from my first field season at the end of 1991 any notions I had about analysing one or two major sites had been overturned by the experiences of working with indigenous families in their cultural landscape.

The transformation of my research occurred through the differences and tensions between the cultural landscapes of the remembered past that I was introduced to by indigenous people and my archaeological inclination towards those parts of the physical landscape with the potential to contain rock shelters and other stratified deposits. It was this interaction which transformed my project from one orientated towards the location and excavation of a few, deeply stratified sites, to one concerned with the processes of cross-cultural engagements in the recent coastal landscape.

When I began to go out with family groups to locate archaeological sites, the question I asked was, 'Where did the old people camp?' In response I was taken around the coast to places known to have been old camping areas. In some cases these were still used on weekends and holiday periods and in others people no longer chose to camp in those same locations. The old camping places were invariably located within the present-day coastal zone at the back of beaches immediately above the high water mark. These camps were often associated with evidence of some form of engagement with Macassans. This included pottery sherds and pieces of glass and metal mixed in with shell-midden remains.

Sometimes former trepang-processing sites were identified as places where the old people had once camped with the Macassans. On other occasions I was taken to locations where no material evidence of cultural activities existed but which were places known and named as camping areas. Many of the areas remembered as old camping sites were obviously recent in age and on examination produced no evidence of archaeological deposits below the ground surface.

There was a contrast between the sites that I was taken to and the ones that I found through archaeological survey. During my first field season in 1991 I mostly excavated sites that I was shown by indigenous people. These were known to be old camping places. The radiocarbon dates for all of these sites proved to be very recent in age (Clarke 1994). The one exception was a small rock shelter located on the eastern side of the island about 1km from the coast in an area called Ararrkba (Fig. 3). I found the site surveying some low sandstone outcrops while some of the Aboriginal women were digging for yams (*Dioscorea transversa*) in the monsoonal vine thickets nearby. The ceiling of the shelter contained red ochre hand stencils together with a number of paintings of fish, canoes and dolphins. It had a sandy floor containing a scatter of marine shells and faceted ochre crayons. Interestingly, the people in whose clan lands the site was situated did not remember or know of the shelter as an old camping place. The basal date for this site was 1230 ± 60 BP (ANU-8316). Because Ararrkba had proved to be the oldest site documented during the first field season, people became interested in locating other places of similar or greater antiquity. So in 1992 we began to explore the foothills around the southern shore of the lake called Angurrwurrikba (Fig. 2). We located a number of sites with paintings and excavated another small rock shelter in an area of land called Angwurrkburna (Fig. 3). As with Ararrkba, this site was not part of the remembered landscape of known camping places and returned a basal date for occupation of 2260 ± 140 BP (ANU 8985).

From the fieldwork it became apparent that there were different temporal strata within the cultural landscapes of Groote Eylandt. There were remembered landscapes associated with old people (deceased relatives and known ancestors) and with Macassans. This landscape came into focus through the way that my questions about the past were interpreted by indigenous people (Clarke 2000a). There was also an older temporal stratum beyond community memory that was revealed through the medium of archaeological research. Through the recursive nature of the fieldwork, as I found myself becoming more interested in the research potential of the recent contact period sites, some of the people I worked with became increasingly interested in the deeper and less familiar past presented by the stratified rock shelters. When I returned to Groote Eylandt in 1995 and 1996 we began an exploratory phase of fieldwork seeking out painted rock shelters in the inland sandstone outcrops some distance away from the familiar camps along the coast.

Conclusion

Community approaches to archaeology in Australia have arisen as a response to indigenous challenges to the assumed authority of archaeologists to be the dominant voice for the material past. On Groote Eylandt a community approach developed from my personal attempt to make sense of the disjuncture between the expectations and experiences of

fieldwork. On Groote Eylandt the community-based project did not start out as a deliberate research strategy but evolved more as a fluid response to the cross-cultural context of fieldwork. While the character of community archaeology will obviously vary according to project, place and people there are some common elements that can be identified. These elements include the use of effective and culturally appropriate media to communicate about the project, the idea that the negotiation of project boundaries is an ongoing process and the recognition that archaeology is generally carried out in other people's social space.

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