

SENTINEL SITES IN A COSMO-POLITICAL SEASCAPE

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Abstract

We describe here a pattern of archaeological sites that suggest that 'mainland' Aboriginal people were viewed by their Torres Strait neighbours as being specialists in particular ritual knowledge. The region under consideration includes the northern-most tip of the Australian continent and extends northward through Torres Strait to Papua. Our study area focuses on the southern end of the region: the Australian mainland as well as Pabaju (Albany Island), Muri (Mt Adolphus Island) and associated islands and islets. Archaeological investigation over many years reveals a high density of ritual sites over this relatively small area. These include sites on prominent headlands. The density and visibility of sites could be interpreted as both marking and 'marketing' ritual expertise. The location of some of the sites also suggests they served as 'sentinels' within a cosmo-political seascape. Far from having an impoverished role in regional exchange networks, Australian mainlanders clearly held something of extraordinary value that drew people from the Torres Strait to their shores. We contend that southern reciprocity in regional trade and exchange may have been based on intangible knowledge transactions, in particular, knowledge related to increase ritual.

Keywords

Cape York, Torres Strait, increase ritual, stone arrangement, ritual landscape

Introduction

At the time of European contact, northern Cape York was home to a number of Aboriginal groups who had varying degrees of interaction with one another. These were the Gudang whose territory extended from Cape York to Fly Point, the Gumakudin whose land was to the southwest of Cape York, the Unduyamo who were in the northern part of Newcastle Bay and the Yadhaigana whose country went from Jacky Jacky Creek to Escape River (see Figure 1). The Gudang and the Unduyamo appeared to have had a strong relationship with each other and with the Kaurareg whose island group centred on Muralag (Prince of Wales Island) but which included many other islands and islets. This included intermarriage and significant periods of co-residence in the country of one or the other. On the other hand, no such relations existed between these groups and either the Yadhaigana or the Gumakudin who they considered to be aggressive (Moore, 1979: 259-260). Our research focuses on this northern part of Cape York, drawing on ethnographic evidence and archaeological sites. We use this evidence to theorise about relationships between Northern Cape York people, their Kaurareg neighbours and island people to the north.

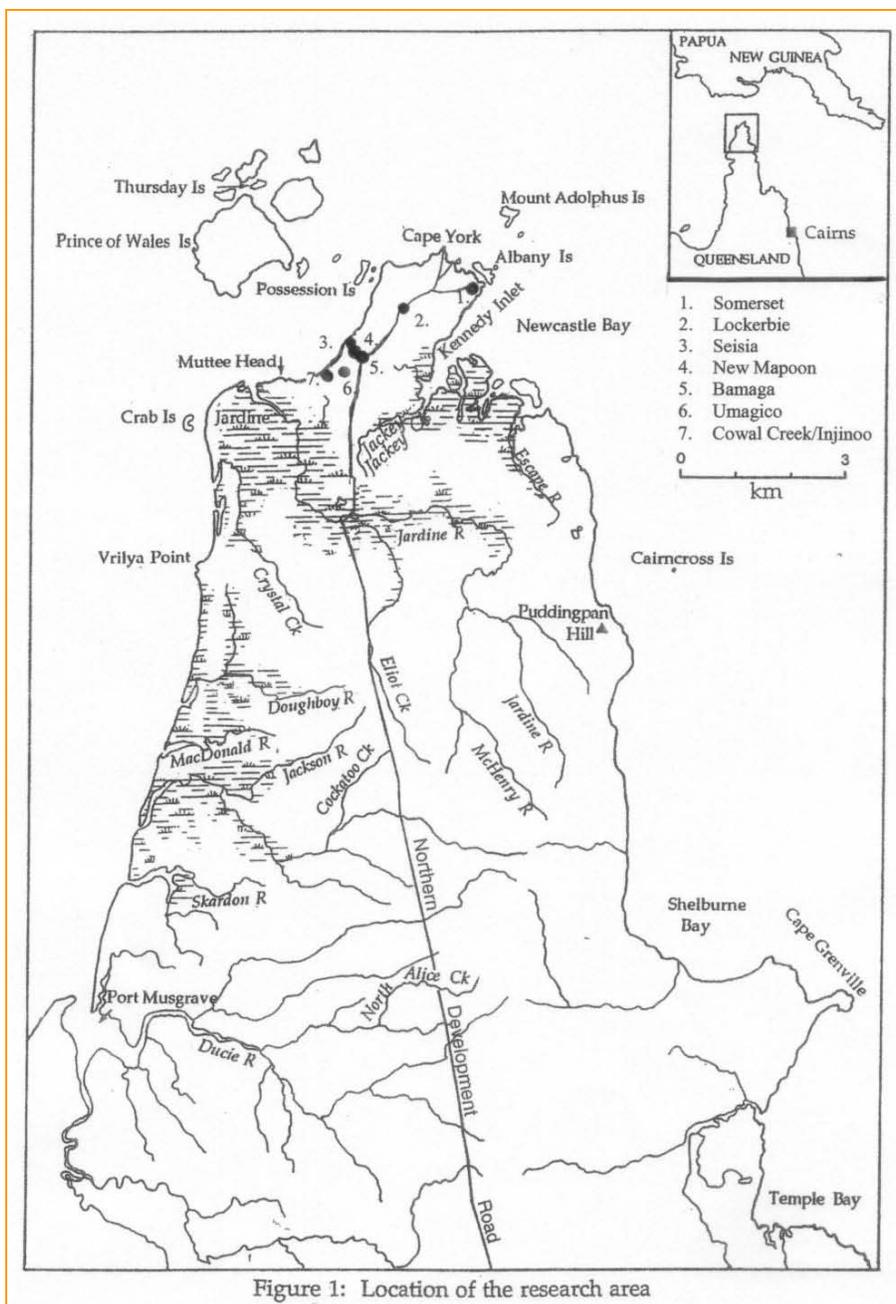


Figure 1: Location of the research area

Figure 1. From Greer (1996a)

We propose that in the past, people at the tip of Cape York in northern Australia were regional ritual specialists and that this expertise is manifested in exchange relations, particularly with their northern neighbours (Greer, McIntyre-Tamwoy and Henry, in prep.; McIntyre-Tamwoy and Harrison, 2004). As in other Australian contexts, Northern Cape York peoples had custodianship of particular ritual sites and expertise that was sought by others

(Sutton, 1979). The fact that peoples from the Torres Strait sought this expertise does not preclude them from possessing their own ritual specialisations. The interactions and exchanges that result from this are what constitute the cosmo-political landscape. While people from the Torres Strait may have had their own increase ritual, we suggest that under certain circumstances they may have sought mainland ritual because of its particular power. We focus on ethnographic evidence of ritual as well as archaeological sites, particularly stone arrangements, located on the northern coast of the mainland as well as on Pabaju (Albany Island) and associated islands and islets. The link between stone arrangements and ritual in Cape York Peninsula was observed by ethnographers (e.g., Brierly in Moore, 1979; McConnell, 1931-32). We are particularly interested in the nature, density and public location of these sites on rocky headlands and their apparent orientation. We use this evidence to explore the potential historical interactions between 'mainland' Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders in terms of a 'cosmo-political landscape'.

Cosmo-political landscapes

We define a cosmo-political landscape as one that is continuously being constructed through a pragmatic politics of identity. This challenges the concept of 'natural' landscape as all land and/or sea scapes are necessarily historical and cultural. In a similar vein, McNiven (2003: 330) refers to the seascapes of Aboriginal people as "animated spiritscapes" and argues that "an archaeology of seascapes needs to extend beyond subsistence and technology and investigate spiritscapes and associated ritual sites used to manage and control the sea spiritually". He says this because there has been a tendency in archaeology to focus on the pragmatic 'subsistence behaviours' of people rather than other dimensions of human agency such as ritual. McNiven illustrates this by examining marine stone arrangements from central Queensland, resonating with our evidence which also includes stone arrangements.

While acknowledging McNiven's contribution, particularly in redirecting the archaeological focus away from 'subsistence behaviours', we prefer the term 'cosmo-political landscape'. This is because we feel that terms such as 'spiritscape' or 'ritualised landscape' emphasise relationships between people and the spirit world but neglect relationships *among* people. By referring to the landscape as 'cosmo-political' we also attempt to convey how people negotiate social, political and economic relations with each other *through* the spiritual world. Through these cosmo-political landscapes people are able to open themselves to others (both human and non-human) in networks of exchange and reciprocity and conversely, upon occasion, they are able to close themselves off; thus emphasising identity boundaries.

Ritual sites in the cosmo-political landscape

Archaeological investigation over many years reveals a high concentration of ritual sites over a relatively small area in northern Cape York including stone circles, other stone arrangements and circular piles of stone (Greer, 1996a, 1996b, 1999, 2009, 2010; Greer et al., 2002; McIntyre-Tamwoy, 2002; McIntyre-Tamwoy and Harrison, 2004; see Figure 2). Some of these stone arrangements were noted by Brierly in 1849 when the survey vessel the *Rattlesnake* was at Cape York. He noted a 'circular pile of stones', 91.5cm in height at the centre, with a line of stones extending out from it, which had only recently been erected by a ritual specialist (Moore, 1979: 127)¹. We suggest that such sites were associated with

increase ceremonies, which are the ritual component of a suite of activities that ensure the appropriate reproduction of the cosmos, including species of plants and animals. Ursula McConnel (who worked further south in Cape York) witnessed and recorded increase rituals in the 1920s, describing in detail their symbolic reference to fecundity and reproduction (McConnel, 1930-31).



Figure 2. Stone circle, northern Cape York

McIntyre-Tamwoy and Harrison (2004) have described turtle mounds on prominent rocky headlands in the vicinity of Cape York itself. Macgillivray (also on the *Rattlesnake*) observed a turtle mound on Cape York Islet in 1848 and thought that this and others he had observed were 'graves'. However, on the basis of their investigation, McIntyre-Tamwoy and Harrison interpret the Cape York Islet site as being associated with 'increase'. Brierly described and sketched a similar site at an Islet near Albany Island (see McIntyre-Tamwoy and Harrison 2004). Radiocarbon dates obtained from this site show that it was used from around 300 years ago to as recently as 1954-1965 which suggests that increase rituals have been conducted at this site for at least this period of time (McIntyre-Tamwoy, 2011).

Painted rock art sites are not common in northern Cape York, yet there are several found at Somerset and Albany Island in the current study area (McIntyre-Tamwoy, 2003; Officer, 2003; Brady, 2004). This builds the case for heightened ritual activity in this area as art sites are also generally thought to be associated with ceremony. Similarly, 'hunting magic' sites (rituals aimed at increasing the hunter's prowess) are known and still used in this area (McIntyre-Tamwoy and Harrison, 2004).

In addition, Greer (1996b, 1999, Greer et al., 2002) describes this area as a cultural landscape based on the beliefs, stories and practices of contemporary Indigenous people. McIntyre-Tamwoy (2002) similarly refers to a 'sentient landscape' which is populated by spirit beings requiring specific practices that provide a bridge between the human and the spirit world. In the same area, Greer (2009) discusses a narrative concerning travelling ancestral beings that extends along the east coast. She associates this story with increase and asserts that the survival of this narrative and the contemporary beliefs and practices associated with this area are evidence of this 'ritual landscape'. This is further illustrated by Greer (2010) who provides a detailed description of contemporary beliefs and practices that link archaeological sites to the spirit world. These are large camp sites that archaeologists

would normally associate with 'subsistence activity', but Greer (2010) suggests that they are 'portals' to the spirit world. Another example of a narrative complex related to a travelling ancestral being is that of Siverri/Kwoiam along the west coast of northern Cape York (Laade, 1967; Thomson, 1934). Versions of this narrative are known from the Mapoon area in the south to the western islands of the Torres Strait where he is the key culture hero, and further north into Papua (Landtman, 1917).

The pattern of evidence that is revealed has some important features in relation to this discussion: first, there is a relative density of ritual sites; secondly, we suggest that they are largely centred on increase activities and finally they are often in prominent locations. While we do not currently have a fine-grained understanding of the way that these sites are related to one another in time, we believe that this pattern of sites could be at least 500 – 1000 years old². We suggest that this pattern provides a fascinating window into the dynamic cosmo-political landscape in the past.

Ritual specialists in the cosmo-political landscape

The density of ritual sites illustrates the ritual focus of northern Cape York people and supports assertions by McNiven (2003) that archaeological interpretation should go beyond 'subsistence' and 'technology'. Further, we suggest that such ritual engagement was at the heart of trade and exchange networks across the region. Interpretations of these networks have focused on the exchange of material items and have consequently suggested that the involvement of Cape York people was limited (e.g., Lawrence 1989, 1994, 1998; McNiven, 1998; Haddon, 1901-1935). Elsewhere, we have identified that the emphasis on tangible rather than intangible aspects of exchange is problematic and suggest rather that the contribution of Cape York people lay in particular ritual expertise, namely 'increase magic' (see Greer et al., in prep.). We suggest that an analysis of the evidence presented here provides further support for this claim.

The most prominent sites in this part of northern Cape York are the stone arrangements that we argue are linked to initiation and increase rituals. McIntyre-Tamwoy and Harrison (2004: 39) make a similar association:

On the basis of this and the physical evidence we argue that Evans Point was an important ceremonial centre, and in conjunction with the stone arrangements at Cape York, was used for both large group increase ceremonies and possibly for inter-Aboriginal and Islander initiation ceremonies.

This link between stone arrangements and increase was similarly observed by McConnel (1931-32) who describes a number of stone arrangements near Coen, south of our field area. She was shown these by two elders of the Kantyu tribe, who told her that the 'totem stones' that ranged from around 5cm to a metre in height and extended in a long line, were kangaroo clan ancestors. Another group of three stones were a mother, father and baby rock-cod, ancestors of the rock-cod clan. According to McConnel's informants, ritual tending of the site causes the rock-cod to "go out into all the creeks and rivers and ensure a plentiful supply everywhere" (McConnel, 1931-32: 293). As McConnel (1931-32: 294) puts

it, "In the dramatic arrangement of the stones, the creative instinct has sought to express its ideas and feelings".

We suspect that mainland peoples may have been regional specialists in increase ritual which was at the centre of such totemic systems. McConnel's (1935-36: 456) investigations in northern Cape York in 1927 revealed a 'totemic culture' very similar to that found elsewhere in Australia, with ritual sites (*auwa*) at which 'increase' ceremonies were performed. She says that these sites were associated with ancestral beings whose activities were revealed in myth and re-enacted in ritual. McConnel (1936: 82, 90) felt that this totemic system had previously existed in the Torres Strait but had been weakened with the introduction of hero cults. She writes that,

...a totemic culture formerly extended across the Cape York-Torres Strait islands-Papua region, and this was similar to that found on Cape York Peninsula to-day, which is... typically Australian in all its features...In the Torres Straits...where village life, fishing activities, gardening and land rights exist alongside a decadent totemism and a chieftainship with warlike tendencies, the economic situation is one in which clans and villages follow a more or less uniform existence of gardening and fishing, and in which the economic relationship between clan and totem has practically ceased to function. Totems exist in a more or less meaningless capacity alongside the cult of heroes (McConnel, 1936: 89-90)

This weakening of the totemic system in Torres Strait is at the heart of our argument. We propose that relations between mainlanders and Torres Strait peoples may have been mediated by the latter's need for increase ceremony in relation to particular ancestral beings and associated totemic species. Our argument is further supported by McNiven and Feldman (2003:176), who refer to Haddon's observation that increase ritual for dugong was not found in Torres Strait:

In marked contrast to Torres Strait, numerous references to dugong increase ceremonies exist for Aboriginal peoples south of the Strait...

The need for 'increase magic' would perhaps have been especially felt when particular species were declining or unavailable due to environmental stress or other factors.

Ritual sites as 'sentinels'

The distribution of ritual sites in the landscape is also interesting as there appears to be a concentration around the coast on islands and islets and they are often in prominent locations. The stone arrangements are located on rocky headlands that project out into Torres Strait and are clearly visible, particularly when approaching by sea from the north.

The prominence of these sites is interesting, as there is a contention that in Australia, ritual activity is usually secret and that ritual sites are often in relatively hidden locations. Yet the high visibility of the sites does not necessarily rule out the secrecy of the ritual activity that was performed there. Ian Keen (1994) for example refers to various strategies that Yolngu employ to maintain secrecy (or inside knowledge) in public contexts. An account by Brierly in 1849 seems to support this. He states that upon arriving at Evans Point he was carefully

led across a rock strewn headland. According to McIntyre-Tamwoy and Harrison (2004) and McIntyre-Tamwoy (2011), Brierly had inadvertently encountered a ceremony. He wrote:

About a dozen natives came down to meet us on the rocks as we landed...as I got out of the boat one of the natives seized my hand, guiding me with great care over the rocks which in this place are all tumbled together, calling out quickly and holding me tightly by the hand when I appeared to be stepping in the wrong direction, pointing to the proper path (Brierly cited in Moore, 1979: 72).

McIntyre-Tamwoy and Harrison (2004) suggest that the fact that he was carefully guided through this area, where an extensive stone arrangement is located, indicates that his movements were being restricted.

The location of these sites on headlands at obvious 'approach points' for travellers from the north, suggests that they may have played a role as 'sentinels'. In other words, they may be part of a system that offered cosmological protection but were also a means of marking identity and difference from others. It is interesting that in the historic period, large white Christian crosses, signifying the 'Coming of the Light', were similarly erected on headlands as visible ritual and spiritual sentinels. While scholars today rarely treat islands as 'closed systems', rather considering them part of wider social systems (D' Arcy, 2006: 6; Hau'ofa 1994, 1998), we argue that it is important to recognise that even in a connected seascape or 'sea of islands', people continue to constitute and practice their identities in terms of geopolitical and cosmological boundaries and liminal zones.

Transactions within the cosmo-political landscape

The prominence, importance and nature of the sites that we have identified supports the idea that northern Cape York people were regional specialists in increase ritual and that this was perhaps an important element of their regional identity and relations. We further contend that their expertise in this area may have been what they had to offer exchange networks within the regional cosmo-political landscape. These sentinel sites could be interpreted as both marking and 'marketing' this ritual expertise. Far from having an impoverished role in regional exchange networks, southerners clearly held something of extraordinary value that drew northerners to their shores. We contend that southern reciprocity in regional trade and exchange was based on intangible knowledge transactions, based on their continuing access to ancestral totemic power which was enacted through increase rituals.

Endnotes

1. The ethnographic record for this region is particularly rich. It includes information obtained by Oswald Brierly (the artist on the *Rattlesnake*) from the shipwreck survivor, Barbara Thompson in the late 1840s (Moore, 1979) as well as the work of A. C. Haddon and the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition at the end of the 18th century (Haddon, 1901-1935).
2. However, there are tantalising hints that this ritual focus may be considerably older. Greer (2009) has tentatively linked one of these narratives to rising sea levels, which span the last 6-8,000 years in this region.

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