Locality
The Community History Magazine

AUTUMN 2002

Editors
Louella McCarthy
Paula Hamilton
Paul Ashton
Annette Salt

Guest Editor
John Maynard

Published by
Australian Centre for Public History
University of Technology, Sydney

Printed by
University of Technology, Sydney
Printing Services

Designed by
The Press Gang

Cover
Gurindji Elder in Country

Contents
Editorial 2

Guest Editorial 3

Articles
‘Localised History: “Dangerous” histories from the Gurindji Country’
by Minoru Hokari 4

‘Merriwinga, “Place of Dreaming”: History and the stories of place’
by Victoria Haskins 7

‘Darkinjung Country: Recapturing the essence of NSW’s Central Coast’
by Nerida Blair 12

‘Still bad yet...’
by Jason de Santolo 15

In Your Locality 17

Reviews 18

Locality is published three times per year by the Australian Centre for Public History (ACPH)

© This volume ACPH 2002
© Individual articles the authors 2002

Individuals or organisations interested in subscribing should write to:

Australian Centre for Public History
University of Technology, Sydney
PO Box 123
Broadway NSW 2007
Australia

email
Louella.McCarthy@uts.edu.au
Paul.Ashton@uts.edu.au
Paula.Hamilton@uts.edu.au

Telephone: 612 9514 1947
Fax: 612 9514 2332

Subscription rates are
$33.00 per annum for individuals
$44.00 per annum for organisations
including GST and postage

ISSN 0818-0792

UTS
University of Technology, Sydney
Localised History: Dangerous Histories from the Gurindji Country

MINORU HOKARI

FAQ: Why are you interested in the Gurindji people’s history?

I cannot even remember how many times I have been asked this question. Many Australians, and also Japanese (including my parents!) have asked me this question because, I suspect, I am not an Australian, and probably more notably, because I am not even a ‘white’ or ‘black’ person. The question implies Aboriginal history has nothing to do with my history, my culture; ‘Hey, it’s not your business!’ It is quite true that the Gurindji people’s past may have no direct connection with my past, but I want to tell you that the Gurindji people’s history changed my life, and my way of looking at the past.

Greg Dening says that history is not the past but the ‘consciousness of the past’ for present purposes. History constitutes various ways of communicating the past and the present. In this context, my historical consciousness led me to the Gurindji history. In this era of globalisation, it should be nothing particularly unique that my ‘consciousness of the past’ interacts with Gurindji people’s ‘consciousness of the past’.

To respond to the question why this Japanese person was interested in the Gurindji people’s history, I can give two answers. First, there was a series of coincidences. I started my undergraduate degree in economics in Japan, when I got seriously bored with it, I began to read books on history, anthropology and philosophy. I eventually encountered Aboriginal cultures and their painful colonial pasts and I was fascinated. I was especially ‘captured’ by the story of the Gurindji Walk-off from the Wave Hill station in 1966. However, there is a second way to answer the above question. This answer was given to me by an Aboriginal elder in the Gurindji country; Earth (or Dreaming) told me to come to the Gurindji country to learn their law and history. I said to him, ‘But I don’t remember...’ He explained that my ‘memory’ was dead and it did not function well. He said, ‘Wake’im up. Just like you come out the bed. Get up!’

At this point, I realised that my presence was ‘localised’ in the context of the Gurindji country and their law. My journey to the Gurindji country became a part of the story from and within the Gurindji country. Naturally, the Gurindji elders’ question was not so much ‘Why are you studying Gurindji history?’ Instead they often implied, ‘Why do people never listen to our stories?’ In response to such Gurindji elders’ teachings, the project I undertook was learning Gurindji histories within the Gurindji mode of historical practice. I called this project ‘cross-culturalizing history’.

Localised history is not a ‘local history’. Local history tends to be a part of ‘universal’ history (or national history, in many cases). In other words, local history is a ‘good history’ that is used to ‘enrich the subject matter of history and make it more representative of society as a whole (Dipesh Chakrabarty). On the contrary, ‘localised history’ is dangerous. It is dangerous because such a history refuses to be universalised. It rejects becoming a
part of the conventional Western mode of history which everyone supposedly has equal access to by going to a library or university.

I have already given an example of such a dangerous story: there is no way of universalising the idea that ‘Minoru Hokari came to the Gurindji country because Dreaming told him so.’ Many ‘Westernised’ people may laugh at me, and say, ‘that’s their belief.’ The Gurindji story of my involvement with their country is ‘localised’, and thus difficult to be accepted by non-Gurindji/non-Aboriginal people. In contrast, even though my story of how I coincidentally became interested in the Gurindji history is also local, it is a much easier story to accept for many Australian settlers. In the same manner, while ‘local history’ is a product of ‘universal/Western’ academic history, ‘localised history’ is a history which one can understand and share only if one patiently stays with its nature/culture of locality.

Let me introduce one of the localised histories from the Gurindji country. In order to explain the colonial history of Australia, one of the Aboriginal elders of Daguragu drew a line from the west to the east telling this line is the ‘earth law’. He explained this is the Jurntakal Dreaming, a very powerful snake that shaped the landscape of many countries, including the Gurindji country. Jurntakal is known to have originated from the sea near Wyndham (Western Australia) and then travelled to the east. Jurntakal is the one who made the law, living beings and the world itself. Therefore, the movement from the west to the east represents the ‘right way’ in the Gurindji moral landscape. Particularly for this old man’s moral philosophy, there is no separation of the physical and the metaphysical. The ‘right way’ is the geographical landscape of his country, but at the same time, it is a moral law brought about by the great journey of Jurntakal.

He then drew a line from the north to the south telling me this was the direction the Europeans came from: ‘Kartiya [Europeans] bin come from here [the north]... He cut’em cross (the right way) ... He broke the law.’

It is common knowledge in the Gurindji country and many other places that Aboriginal people possess ‘historical knowledge’ that Captain Cook came to Darwin and started to invade Australia. In the Gurindji version of the story, Captain Cook arrived in Darwin harbour and proceeded south to the Gurindji country and shot Aboriginal people in order to establish cattle stations. The old man said that during this march, Captain Cook cut across the Jurntakal Dreaming track. Here, colonialists’ spatial movement accurately represents the immorality of Australian colonisation. For him, the concept of morality is intricately related to the local geography. He continues:

Captain Cook that fella came. He came to this country and put them [settlers] everywhere. We never do it. It’s no good. We live together. Same blood, same body, only difference is skin colour. See, Captain Cook done wrong thing. He shoot the people, steal women. We never do it. Only whitefella did it. You should live together... They came here and do wrong thing but we never go England.

This is a typical example of ‘localised history’. One of the most distinctive features of the old man’s thought is that he knows and can draw spatial directions of morality within his country’s landscape. The (universal concept of) ‘colonialism’ is interpreted and assessed locally through sand drawings. By considering the geographical and moral direction created by Jurntakal Dreaming, this old man of Daguragu succeeded in analysing the history of Australian colonisation within the local landscape.

Such a Gurindji people’s history is ‘dangerous’ because it does not fit within the framework of the Euro-academic mode of history which tends to claim ‘universality’. Conventional historians cannot accept the Gurindji historical analysis because they know Captain Cook never came to the Gurindji country. Furthermore, within the framework of Western historical practice, spatial movement does not represent moral judgement. Localised history is ‘dangerous’ because Western historical consciousness believes its ‘universality’ cannot (or is not allowed to) enter the Gurindji historical...
Gurindji Elder

Locality

Minoru Hokari

consciousness. Therefore, localised histories from the Gurindji country make us realise that the desire for universality itself is modern/Western 'culture' – associated with 'enlightenment' – which has dominated and 'colonised' non-Western modes of history.

In contrast, the Gurindji and many other Aboriginal cultures refuse to allow their knowledge to be universalised and instead demand that it be maintained locally. Deborah Bird Rose argues, 'knowledge, in all Aboriginal systems of information, is specific to the place and to the people. To put it another way, one of the most important aspects of Aboriginal knowledge system is that they do not universalise. Moreover, the fact that knowledge is localised and specific is one of the keys to its value.'6

Localised history asks us to communicate and share the different cultural modes of history rather than dominate other ways of looking at the past. This is the value of localised history, especially because we are in an era in which cultural difference needs to be deeply acknowledged. Localised history is 'fragmentary'7 because Gurindji historical analysis can be understood only if you place yourself locally in the context of the Gurindji people's 'consciousness of the past'. By its very nature, localised knowledge refuses to be integrated into the Euro-centric 'universal' model of history. Localised history resists being assimilated into the Western mode of history, but calls for communication between different modes of history. This is the history in which I see the possibility of multicultural negotiation over the Australian pasts, and possibly over the 'global histories'. Historical studies needs to be emancipated from its obsession with being universal, and thus realise the value of learning histories locally.

Acknowledgements

This article owes mostly to the Aboriginal people of Daguragu and Kalkaringi who kindly accepted me as a person learning their history. I would like to acknowledge their generosity and support of my study. My fieldwork was made possible largely through grants from the Research Fellowships of the Japan Society for the Promotion