

## 15. Gurindji mode of historical practice

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What is Aboriginal history? We academic historians who work in the Western-modern and potentially colonial institution cannot avoid facing this question. Indeed, the very concept of ‘Aboriginal history’ seems to be of Western origin. Bain Attwood (1989) argued that ‘Aborigine’ is an historical product of the Western consciousness. The term ‘history’ itself is normally based on the Western linear notion of time (Young 1990). Therefore, the following questions have arisen: Can non-Aboriginal settlers understand and write Aboriginal peoples’ histories? Who owns Aboriginal history? How can academic historians collaborate with Aboriginal historians?

Drawing upon field research between 1997 and 1999 with the Gurindji of Daguragu in the Northern Territory, I explore the Gurindji way of historical practice. This practice is one centred in storytelling involving both place and self and is contextualised in terms of Gurindji ontology and cosmology. After learning what ‘history’ is like from the Gurindji, I realised a need to demonstrate the difference or ‘gap’ between academic and Gurindji historical practices. However, my purpose is not to dichotomise ‘our history’ and ‘their history’. Instead, my goal is to set up a dialogue and negotiation between two historical practices in order to share ways of constructing the past.

### **Body: Paying attention to the history**

Let us start with how to use one’s body to practise Gurindji history. Gurindji, especially the Elders, often sit on the ground and do nothing for a long time. I *thought* that they were doing nothing. If there is no ceremony or urgent meeting, they will often spend all day apparently doing nothing. It took me a while to realise that they were actually ‘seeing’, ‘listening’, and ‘feeling’. If you want to know what is happening

in this world, you should stay still and pay attention to the world. Be aware of what is happening around you. Do not make your own 'noise' which often fogs your senses.

The idea I learned was: do not use your body and senses to look for something. Instead, something comes to you if you are quiet enough to take notice. I usually try to understand the world by asking and searching. However, Gurindji demonstrated to me how to know the world by simply being still and paying attention. The art of knowing is not always the way of searching, but often the way of paying attention (Rose 1999). In fact, paying attention to the world happens even more strongly while moving around the country. Gurindji listen and see very carefully and tell each other what is happening around them while they are moving. They see and listen, then report and share their findings with each other. Your body is the essential medium to know the world. It does not matter if you are sitting, standing, or moving.

Paying attention is also essential when the Gurindji practise their history. Paying attention to the world means not only knowing what is happening, but also remembering what happened here and there. They do not search for history as academic historians do. Instead, they *pay attention* to their history. When I say take notice of the history around you, I am not mystifying or romanticising the Gurindji way of historical practice. For the Gurindji, history is not a subject that you 'choose' to learn. Instead, history is happening everywhere in their everyday life. For instance, you drive a car to visit your family in another community and see that hill, and you remember (or you hear the Elder's teachings or discussion) that Aborigines were killed there by whitefellas in the early days. You are fishing in this waterhole and you remember (or are told) that this old man's father dived underwater here and asked the rainbow snake to make a big rain. That's how old Wave Hill Station was washed away. History should be listened to, seen, and felt around yourself in your everyday life. History is something your body can sense, remember, and practise.

For the Gurindji, all bodies, objects and landscapes contain memories. Therefore, historical practice should not be only words, but also visual expression. The body is essential for practising Gurindji history. You see the history. You listen to the history. Your body senses and feels the history. You use your body by listening, seeing, visiting, performing, sharing, sitting, moving, and interacting. The Gurindji historians demonstrated to me that historical practice is, at least partly, a bodily work. It is a lived experience.

## The world: History of maintenance

According to the Gurindji, the world is full of life. There are many living beings, especially in the bush. Apart from plants and animals, there are, for example, *kaya* (ghosts) living in the cave that come out at night and kill you and steal the meat from your campsite. *Mungamunga* in the bush and *karrkan* in the water are both beautiful women who seduce men and sleep with them. As I will discuss soon, Dreaming or Ancestral Beings are all alive in the world too. They include stones, hills, rivers, waterholes, and rainbows, as well as animals, insects, and plants (Rose 1996:23–33).

When one of the elderly men in Daguragu (who passed away in 2001 and who I would not name here) said that everything comes from the earth, I understood that everything was created and has been maintained by the earth. The earth or, in a sense, ‘place’ is neither a conceptual nor non-organic space in which every being exists and lives. Instead, place is the origin, cause, and reason of every life and its existence. To describe this, this old man often used the following five different words: Earth, Dreaming, Law, ‘Right Way’, and History.

At first glance, these words seem to explain the sequence of the world’s creation: ‘Earth’ was there first. Then, ‘Dreaming’ came out to shape the place and other beings. Dreaming also made the ‘Law’ for this created world so that we can maintain it by following and practising the Law. Instead of Law, this man sometimes uses the word ‘Right Way’ referring to the Dreaming track as well as ethical behaviour. Eventually, this became the ‘History’ of the world. However, his teaching was not really as simple as this, because Earth, Dreaming, Law, ‘Right Way’, and History are also interchangeable to one another. For instance, when Dreaming shaped that hill and made Law, the hill became the Law itself. In general, the landscape is not just the product of Dreaming, but is itself Dreaming. In the same way, Dreaming did not just create the Law — Dreaming is the Law. Logically, since Dreaming itself is Law, a place becomes the Law as well.

At this point, I would like to remind you of another of his terms; ‘Right Way’. Using this word, he taught us it was an issue of morality. ‘Right Way’ is a geographical Dreaming track *as well* as an ethical behaviour. In Gurindji philosophy, I understand that the ‘Right Way’ or morality does not include the physical/metaphysical separation. ‘Right Way’ is a geographical landscape as well as human behaviour. Morality is spatial as well as behavioural. The Earth, Dreaming, and Law are

identical because all of these have the same essential quality, namely, the 'Right Way' or the morality of the world (Hokari 2002).

Dreaming story tells you not only about the origin of the world, but also how the world has been maintained. The world has been moral because Dreaming came out of the Earth not only for creating but also for maintaining the world. This is because Dreaming teaches us how to look after this created world. Moral behaviour is an attitude which contributes to sustaining the world. Ritual practice is a typical example. Visiting your country and communicating with your country or ancestral beings is also an important practice for maintaining the world. This is the 'History' of the moral world. This is history because this is how the world has been maintained. Landscape is history because it contains visible memories and evidence that the world has been maintained. The Gurindji are also part of moral history because they hold their memories of world's creation, thus, they are the evidence that the world has been maintained. Earth, Dreaming, 'Right Way', and Law are the origin of the world and the History of maintaining the world.

### **Movement: Its function and ethics**

When I was at Daguragu, I was amazed by how frequently members of the community moved. Some were away for a couple of weeks visiting their relatives, some had gone to Darwin and nobody knew if they would ever come back. Even staying in the community, people love to go bush, hunting, fishing, swimming, or even just moving around their country. It is of no doubt that Gurindji were, and in many aspects still are, 'nomadic'. But do we know why? Anthropologists used to explain Aboriginal mobility by economic necessity. A hunting and gathering economy is possible only by constantly moving your camping sites (Rose 1987; Yengoyan 1968). However, such an explanation is meaningless to the contemporary Aboriginal mobility because today you can access enough food within the community.

In fact, the real question here is not the purpose of their movement, but the process. Our question 'why are they nomadic?' cannot be answered only by asking 'why do they move?' Instead, the real question should be 'how do they move?' For a while, I thought Gurindji liked travelling as many of us do too. However, I realised that their movement is normally not travel at all. Their mobility is not for getting out of their home, but interestingly enough, for living in their 'home'. For Gurindji, 'home' is not a small box called 'house'. Gurindji use their house almost

like a storeroom. They keep their rifle, boomerang and few other valuable things in the house, but they spend most of their time outside. Continuing with this analogy, the outside of a house within the community is a kind of 'living room' in which you can eat, play, talk, and sleep.

If a house is a 'store room' and the community is a 'living room', what is 'home' for the Gurindji people? By 'home', I mean a place one lives with one's family offering security and happiness. At this stage, I understand that their home is their country itself. There are so many other 'rooms' you should visit and stay such as 'fishing rooms', 'bush plum rooms', or 'ceremonial rooms', and so on. Therefore, they naturally move around their country because they do not want to stay only in the storeroom and living room all the time. Here, for the time being, the answer is given: the Gurindji are 'nomadic' not because they are travellers by nature, but because their 'home' is a lot bigger than settlers' small boxes or houses. However, we also should not forget that the world is alive and full of life in the Gurindji country. That being said, the relationship between you and your 'home' cannot be like that between owners and their private property. You are not the owner of your 'home', but a part of it.

This is the key to understanding the meaning of the Gurindji people's movement. I have already mentioned that morality in the Gurindji cosmology is related to the way the world is maintained. Ritual practice as well as visiting one's country and communicating with Ancestral Beings are fundamental activities enacted to sustain the world. Therefore, this is moral behaviour. I would like to emphasise here that such moral behaviour is not possible without movement. In short, mobility is simply essential for the people as well as for the Dreaming to maintain the world.

As the Dreaming has maintained people through its movement, people maintain their Dreaming through their movement as well. You should maintain the world through your 'ethical movement' as Dreaming does to you as well. Such 'ethics of spatial movement' are not only in ritual practice, but are applied in everyday activities as well. It is your movement that connects you and the world, and its moral history. Movement is the origin of the world, the history of the world, and the morality of the world. After all, it does not always matter what the purpose of one's movement is. Rather, the process (i.e. movement itself) is the reason why they are 'nomadic'.

## Knowledge: The Gurindji epistemology

The idea that mobility is the essence of maintaining the world also means that you do not have a 'central place' in the world. One of the reasons you have to move around your country is that Dreaming sites are scattered all over the country. There is no 'central sacred site' through which you can maintain the whole country. There is no 'central ceremonial place' where you can 're-charge' the entire world. Therefore, ceremonies should be shared and exchanged between different places.

As anthropological works show, sacred sites are the points that connect Dreaming beings' movements. Dreaming tracks are the lines which connect the countries and peoples rather than divide them (Rose 1996:35–47; Strehlow 1970:129). Therefore, movement becomes a fundamental function since the Gurindji cosmology is based on the networking among many sites, countries, and people without a concept of 'the centre'. The world has been maintained through the web of connection between Dreaming Beings, peoples, and their countries and ceremonies.

This view of the Gurindji cosmology leads us to the unique positioning of your 'self' in the world. In short, 'self' becomes remarkably relationalised. This happens at least on two different levels. First of all, your 'self' as a living human cannot be the centre of the world. As already discussed, the Dreaming or ancestral being is as alive as living human beings. Your existence relies on the Dreaming activities, and vice versa. Therefore, your 'self' is not a control agency of the world. Instead, human activities are relationalised by the Dreaming activities. A living person cannot claim him/herself as a central figure of the world. Secondly, your country cannot be the centre among other peoples and countries. Because Dreaming sites and tracks are always connected with other peoples and countries, the existence of your 'self' and country is guaranteed only by the interaction with other peoples and their countries. Therefore, you cannot maintain your country by yourself, but only through the connection with other peoples and their countries. To sum up, there is no being which can be the centre of the living world. And, there is no country which can be the centre of all countries. In other words, your 'self' finds its position in the web of connection: the connection with other beings, and other countries.

As your 'self' is relationalised through the web of connection, knowledge is also relationalised. There is no place where and no person

who generates the authentic knowledge spreading it out like radiation from one place to all places. Instead, in the Gurindji information system, knowledge happens anywhere and mobility brings it to everywhere in all directions.

This information system creates a particular manner of maintaining Gurindji knowledge. Because there is no authentic centre that guarantees the validity of the information, the knowledge naturally creates many variations through the process of networking. It is quite normal that the different stories which contradict each other do not conflict, but simply coexist. Information of different variations is preferred, pooled and maintained as a bundle of possibilities without judgment. It is an open system because wherever stories come from, whomever stories are brought by, they are regarded equally and pooled without urgent judgment. The Gurindji knowledge system is not only open but also flexible. It is a flexible system because one chooses a story from the pooled possibilities according to the context of one's story-tellings. One chooses one of the stories that suit the context. Knowledge or pooled stories are always chosen and used according to the story-telling context.

### **What is Gurindji historical practice?**

History is happening all over the country so that mobility is essential to access history physically. Furthermore, mobility creates the unique relationship between your 'self' and the world. You find your 'self' in relation to the web of connection: connection with other beings, other countries, and other community members. Naturally, your historical practice becomes relationalised into the web of connection as well. You are not the central figure of a practising history. Nor can you practise the history by yourself. Instead, your historical practice must 'connect' to the places, Dreaming, countries, and people. Historical practice can be possible only through the interaction between the living world and yourself.

Gurindji maintain their historical knowledge based on its multiplicity. It is natural and preferable to maintain many different versions of a certain event. As a storyteller you choose the story from the pooled knowledge according to the context of where, what, and who you are relating to and what you are trying to express. However, at another level, you can also say that every historical narrative is a new version of the event because your positioning in the networking world is never

the same. You are a part of the web of connection, and your mobility always brings you to a new position in this web. Therefore, places and your body connect each other and create histories every time differently in particular contexts. This process means that history is always situated.

Gurindji history does not have an authentic textbook that anyone can access equally in any time or in any place. Instead, Gurindji history happens to particular people, in particular places, at specific times. At the same time, this situated history has been happening repeatedly to anyone, anywhere, at any time. In other words, historical knowledge has been created, and is maintained through the web of connection among the people, Dreaming beings, and their countries.

### **‘Doubled consciousness’ and cross-cultural communication**

It is important to acknowledge the ‘gap’ between the academic mode of history and what I have explored here as the Gurindji/Aboriginal mode of history. We should not ignore this gap and pretend that we all can share ‘history’ without much trouble. However, acknowledging the gap should not be the end of the story but a starting point to communicate across the gap. Here, what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000:240, 254–5) calls ‘doubled consciousness’ is highly suggestive. Even though Gurindji body/place-oriented historical practice is quite a contrast to academic historical disciplines, academic historians also live their everyday lives away from their academic consciousness. It is not too difficult to realise that we all do experience history in our bodies and places without the academic discipline in our everyday lives. In other words, what Gurindji historians are doing in their country is not necessarily unfamiliar for the rest of the people. The gap is unavoidably there, but we can still understand and communicate with each other once we academic historians become humble enough to accept we cannot dominate ‘history’ happening all over the world.

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