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Being on Country: Githabul approaches to mapping culture

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With a general rise in interest in cultural mapping over recent decades, this chapter¹ discusses two approaches to recording and mapping Indigenous cultural relations to land employed by Githabul people in NE NSW. Mapping scope and methods in this project were developed with participants, revealing their particular views and situations. These approaches are explored, and I argue that the idea of being on Country, a common element of the two approaches, forms a key aspect of maintaining a shared cultural identity within the Githabul community. This influences perceptions of the value of mapping culture, while also opening heritage work up to include intangible aspects of culture.

Introduction – charting a brief history of Indigenous mapping

In an early and eloquent portrayal, Howard Morphy (1983) called attention to the complex interface of Indigenous culture and land politics in the post-protection era by describing Yolngu methods of representing ‘sacred knowledge’ in the public sphere as a means of demonstrating traditional ties to land. During the 1950s and 60s, Yolngu elders revealed to Australian courts and the world at large traditional bark paintings, usually kept hidden from the view of those uninitiated in their culture, and thereby demonstrated the basis of the laws that had in their eyes regulated a system of land ownership since time immemorial. This was a significant moment not only for its influence on the land rights movements of the 1970s, but it also represented a shift in the dynamics of Indigenous cultural politics in Australia, with Yolngu elders engaging directly, and to considerable effect, with the European legal system in terms that were rooted in Yolngu ceremony and culture. Morphy found it useful to think of the paintings as maps of the culture and politics in Yolngu society, maps which assisted Yolngu in maintaining political and cultural autonomy in a world that demanded their assimilation into the mainstream of white Australian culture.

In somewhat parallel developments, the last 20 years has seen an increasing trend of Indigenous communities across the globe mapping these relationships, increasingly in Western cartographic forms (Sirait *et al.* 1994; Rundstrom 1995; Fox 1998; Gambold 2001; Chapin *et al.* 2005; Pramono *et al.* 2006; Byrne 2008; Tobius 2009). Peluso (1995) was the first to capture a precise image of this recent trend by coining the term ‘counter-mapping’. In this case the Penan people

¹ Fieldwork for this paper was undertaken during 2010 as part of my PhD research, and was jointly supported by the Department of Archaeology and Natural History, The Australian National University and the Country, Culture and Heritage Division, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service through the ‘Rethinking Cultural Heritage’ ARC Research Project. I am grateful to all at Githabul Working on Country for their input and collaboration.

with whom she worked viewed their relationship with the forests of central Borneo as culturally embedded and unique, and chose to develop their own maps that provided a view of the landscape that ran ‘counter’ to the maps being developed by foresters and conservationists. Both of these ignored Penan relationships to land, instead focusing on either economic or scientific views of the forest, views that were proving influential in deciding the fate of those forests.

Peluso’s account reflected some shifts in thinking since Morphy (1983) which would prove influential, widening the scope of these endeavours beyond the confines of the sacred, considering these issues within the context of conservation, and acknowledging the increased influence of mapping in bureaucratic land management and planning. Since then the idea of counter-mapping as a practical tool in land management has grown significantly, the successes of the land rights movement in Australia have delivered greater control over land to many Aboriginal communities, and the popularity of cultural mapping has remained.

A practical context for mapping

In New South Wales, this trend has been reflected in an increasing number of publications providing located explorations of mapping techniques, particularly in cultural heritage management contexts. English (2002), Byrne and Nugent (2004), and English and Gay (2005) have undertaken in-depth mapping projects in collaboration with Indigenous communities in NSW² and the opportunities and demands of the co-management system instituted within the NSW National Park and Wildlife Service in 1998 are frequently reflected in these studies, being a key local driver of community based heritage research.³

This paper explores mapping undertaken with Githabul people as part of a recent national parks co-management agreement in the Border Ranges in central eastern Australia. The Githabul are traditional owners of an area that encompasses the towns of Kyogle, Woodenbong and Bonalbo in the Northern Rivers region of NSW and extending north and west to Killarney and Warwick in southeast Queensland (see Figure 1). While some scholars, most notably linguist Margaret Sharpe (1985a, 1985b), have viewed Githabul as part of the Bundjalung group of tribes, many Githabul reject this categorisation and instead assert an identity as a separate cultural group with sovereign ties to their land.⁴ In recognition of this, the Federal Court in 2007 recognised Githabul native title rights over 1120 km² of public land, stretching from the Border Ranges in the east, north to the NSW-QLD border and as far west as the Great Dividing Range. This land is managed as either timber production forest or as National Park, and following the determination, Githabul have negotiated agreements with the NSW Government for involvement in its management. In 2009 the Githabul Working on Country (GWC) organisation was established,⁵ and since then they have been undertaking land management and conservation works inside the National Park lands, and have also recently begun developing programs with Forests NSW, who manage the remaining timber production forests.

² See also Tobius (2009).

³ Adams and English (2005) provide a useful reflection on the co-management system in terms of negotiating diverging value systems and views of nature between Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders.

⁴ When necessary Githabul point to anthropological studies since the 1950s which have identified their community as having a connection to traditional culture that is unusually strong in the context of southeast Australia (e.g. Hausfeld 1960; Creamer 1974; Native Title Services 2005).

⁵ The Working on Country program is an Australian Federal Government initiative designed to support the establishment of Indigenous land management organisations. In this case it has provided funding for the establishment of the Githabul Working on Country organisation to undertake nature conservation, natural resource, and cultural heritage management programs in the areas over which Githabul people hold Native Title rights. The principle means by which GWC achieves this is through their Ranger group, who undertake all on-ground works under the direction of the Githabul Native Title representative body.

Figure 1. The Far North Coast of NSW.

Source: CartoGIS, College of Asia and the Pacific, ANU.

In this paper I will focus on two approaches to mapping Country⁶ that have been utilised by Githabul community members within the context of this new co-management agreement—that of mapping traditional culture, such as stories, sites and language in traditional forms, and that of mapping everyday cultural practices, such as fishing places and hunting grounds, in Western cartographic forms. By describing the use of these contrasting methods, and considering these choices in the contexts of the Githabul community itself and the broader currents of Indigenous cultural politics in Australia, I hope to shed some light on the role that representing culture through mapping can play in a community context, as well as identify the limits of its value. In doing so, I also hope to reveal some of the basic aspects of cultural life for Indigenous people in rural New South Wales, and it is my view that this is a strong influence on determining perceptions of the value of such projects within the Githabul community, as well as the appropriateness of different forms of mapping.

As is common in many Indigenous communities, concepts of tradition and cultural continuity are central to individuals developing an understanding of their place within the Githabul community, and I initially want to show that the relationship to traditional Githabul culture, particularly as it relates to sacred knowledge, was the key factor in determining the approaches to mapping work

⁶ As is now widely recognised, *Country* is a term used by Aboriginal people throughout Australia to refer to their traditional lands. Used in this paper, it implies the culturally embedded nature of land ownership, and therefore includes in its scope of meaning the full range of cultural relationships that Indigenous people maintain with their lands. For an in depth discussion of the term see Rose (1996).

in each case. In the case of those in the community who held traditional knowledge and were considered its rightful spokespersons, the mapping process was similar to the Yolngu case, being determined and developed in ways seen to reflect and promote Githabul culture in its own terms. For those who were still learning about traditional culture, particularly younger participants, the work relied more heavily on the counter-mapping model. In the latter case the process was more oriented towards exploring the value of these techniques within the context of co-management, whereas in the former case the mapping was developed as an ‘authentic representation’ of traditional culture—its value was seen as both instrumental and intrinsic.

While the differences between the two approaches provide insight into the variation of knowledge and status within the Githabul community, the similarities reveal what can be seen as a fundamental aspect of a shared Githabul identity—that being on Country is seen as a central part of Githabul life. Similar connections can be found throughout NSW, however in the case of Githabul, the express linking of such activities to the survival of both traditional cultural forms and everyday cultural practices today provides a valuable insight into the views they hold about the relationship of their culture to that of mainstream Australia, and therefore the value they place on such planning and documentation activities as cultural mapping.

In this paper I seek to show that by insisting on the connection between being on Country and the documentation of cultural practices and values, Githabul are seeking to maintain their sense of tradition and continuity, while also resisting what Merlan has described as mainstream society’s ‘demands [for Aboriginal people] to demonstrate traditionality, or continuity with practices and forms considered traditional’ (2006:85). In this way discussions of cultural heritage were taken beyond what might be considered the conventional archaeological view of heritage that focuses on sites to encompass issues of community health and well being, intangible values and spiritual philosophies, and contemporary visions of land management (Byrne 2008).⁷ Such well-established themes in anthropological discussions and, increasingly, literature surrounding Indigenous land management in Australia are here extended to consideration of cultural heritage management and mapping in particular as a tool in program development with Indigenous organisations.⁸

Before proceeding, it is important to note some practical background of this project. This paper does not present results of a full mapping project and it does not necessarily represent the full range of views and expressions of cultural attachments to Githabul Country that exist within that community. Working in collaboration with Githabul Working on Country, in early 2010 a pilot project for developing cultural heritage programs was established within the organisation.⁹ In the initial phase, this project focused on working with Doug Williams, a senior Githabul custodian, and in the second phase of the project, the work focused on involving the Githabul Rangers. As this was the first cultural project undertaken by the organisation, there was an identified need for the scope of the work to be negotiated on an ongoing basis, to allow for a period where I could be introduced to Githabul culture and Country, and also to allow for GWC to identify the best ways for collaborating researchers and consultants to be involved in cultural projects. With this in mind, this paper is an exploration primarily of the process of mapping Indigenous cultural heritage, through a case study of the issues that emerged in the course of conducting a pilot study with one Githabul community organisation.

7 See Maddock (1991) for a thorough examination of the rise of a sites-based discourse in Northern Territory land rights law. Many of Maddock’s insights can be equally applied to subsequent developments since Mabo.

8 Rose (1996) e.g. in her discussion of the term ‘Country’ made the express link between community health and well being and connections to Country and this is becoming an increasingly accepted notion (see Albrecht *et al.*; Altman 2003; Johnston *et al.* 2007).

9 As noted in the acknowledgements, my capacity was as a PhD researcher, with our collaboration having the dual aims of contributing to a) a government funded research project exploring new directions in Indigenous cultural heritage, and b) the ongoing program of developing cultural heritage management programs within GWC.

To consider first the kangaroo skin map, Doug gave this description of its significance:

First of all the two skins are tied or knitted together, one on the left is the Githabul one, it's a male kangaroo, it's Githabul, and that's all my grandfather's tribal boundary, his Country, and all the history, the *butheram*, the stories, *ngumbule*, ceremony. And on the right side's my grandmum, my grandmother, Ngarakbul nation, sovereign tribe. And there's that skin marriage, clans that were joined together of the two tribes, and everything pertaining to the laws within those two tribes were gelled together, and gave us free passage, access both ways. So they're my blood. I'm a blood connected sovereign owner of land, my grandfather and my grandmother.

And why is it on the kangaroo skin? Well this is our way of recording and transcribing, and there are sacred stories and sacred songs that are associated with this skin that detail everything about both tribes, and primarily it starts with *gamay-nga gan*, Venus, the morning star, which is over on the right hand side. And the songline that started from Julian Rock, just out of Byron Bay, *wayo jalgumboonj*, the fairy-emu that my grandmother talks about, goes right through the central desert, right out through the west coast, out to sea out there.

And so the kangaroo skin, to do a comparison to white man's history, they've documented everything, supposed to be on paper, and indexed and archived on paper. But this here, obviously the kangaroo, they use it now as a national symbol, but to us it's more sacred than all of that, because this here predates everything about federation, everything about the invasion.

So this skin, it outlines the boundary of both tribes and it tells us about where our boundary is, and also the stories and the songline that connects up to neighbouring tribes. But primarily, all the names that I have here are names of some of the current towns and villages that have been named after a lot of the white history, I've changed and given the proper name in Githabul, the real name which has meaning and substance. (Kyogle 3/12/10)

Once Doug had shown me the kangaroo skin, the next task was for us to go on a series of trips across the Country he had mapped out as a way of familiarising me with it and relating different aspects of what he described above.

Throughout the Country, there are many places that Githabul often make oblique references to as powerful places. Some of these are referred to as *juraveels*, and form a key aspect of Githabul cosmology and beliefs, being seen as places where powerful spirits reside. They are also a key aspect of Githabul political organisation, with different families in the community having responsibilities to 'look after' particular *juraveels* and therefore are considered to have rights to 'speak for' those places. Today this translates across to practical issues of consultation over their use, be it for access, potential developments or for cultural recording projects (see Hausfeld 1960 and Creamer 1974 for more in depth discussion of *juraveels*).

One of the interesting things to observe was that as we'd travel to different places, Doug would often begin speaking in Githabul in a low voice, and on at least two occasions he sang out loudly. Once he stopped at the point where Mt Lindsay (see Figure 3) is first visible from its southern approach to 'sing out' to the mountain, and once from a large rock above a valley high up in the Bald Rock Range. When I asked him about the significance of language and song, he had this to say:

There are two important factors that we consider very sacred, and of paramount importance in the history, and the families that are living in even *guri guriarba*, long before my time, *guriarba* days. That language, story and song are inseparable, they are an integral part of our whole culture, and its connected to the land

and also *gumanyargan*, the star laws, these are very prominent and very important, where the stars, the heavens connect up to the waters, and comes through the land, it goes through the cycle, it continues on, it lives on. And wherever we go there's stories and songs, we can walk our songlines. And there are certain places where we must sing to have access, to appease the *juraveel*, wherever, that mountain, that waterfall, to have safe passage. There's a whole lot of aspects to these different stories, the *butheram*, about certain significant and sacred sites. (Kyogle, 3/12/10)

The idea that Githabul must sing to Country as they enter sacred places extends further—to sing or speak about them while in another place is forbidden, you must be in a place to be able to talk about it. As described, this is a practical process of ensuring safety and prosperity while in that place; however, it also serves to maintain a highly localised cultural form, where separation from Country prevents the activities that directly maintain the connection of Githabul with their sacred places, a process that connects Githabul into their Country and its continuing cycles. Importantly, this was one of the primary reasons why Doug would not record specific information about spirits associated with places and kept our discussions largely in the realm of general ideas of Githabul culture, history and law – it can be viewed as a means by which the story could be related beyond the confines of its appropriate use, it opened the culture up to misuse. It was also the reason he would insist on visiting places as a central aspect of our work.

Figure 3. Mt Lindsay near Woodenbong, a prominent peak in the Border Ranges and one of the central places in Githabul cosmology.

Source: Photo Nick McClean.

We did however visit five areas as important places in the Githabul cultural landscape —Mt Lindsay (see Figure 3), Julian Rocks (see Figure 4), Bald Rock, Bulls Head Mountain and Toloom Falls. Of these, Mt Lindsay, Bulls Head Mountain and Toloom Falls are in the immediate vicinity of Woodenbong and are well documented as being associated with important *juraveels* (see Hausfeld 1960 and Creamer 1974). Julian Rocks is associated with Githabul culture by virtue

of the alliance Doug claims between Githabul and Ngarakbul and by it being the beginning of a large songline that passes through Githabul Country. Bald Rock Range is said by Doug to form the Western extent of Githabul Country, and he chose to go to Bald Rock to re-establish a relationship that he says Githabul have been prevented from maintaining since white people came to Githabul Country.

Figure 4. Doug Williams at Julian Rocks, Byron Bay, the beginning of the fairy emu songline that passes through Githabul Country.

Source: Photo Nick McClean.

Of interest in this discussion are Doug's explanations of how he came to learn about traditional Githabul culture, which he related as follows:

As recorded by my great uncle Dhuroom, that's my Dad's eldest brother, the family genealogy was done by him, taken way back to a man named Yaguy. Many occasions when I was growing up I'd listen to my dad, my grandma, the old men, who would always talk, and there were continuous and constant ceremonies and relating to the times and the sequence of events that used to relate to the land and to the different parts of the land, and particularly the two major factors was having the language and the songs, and the *butheram*, the stories. *Yaribil*, the singing of those songs, and *yawarr*, the ceremonies. And they were handed down, knowledge, and even how to avoid confrontation where necessary, and perhaps even suppress our own knowledge and culture, and then it would be brought out at an opportune time.

And that has been the case, our people were very wise, they knew there were elements, there were people that was employed, engaged by the government and the policy makers, and all that, very disruptive through the Aboriginal welfare board policies and legislations that were forced on our people to suppress and to try and erase... many attempts, we thought they were managers that were commissioned by the government at the times, in the early 50s and 60s to come on and manage our people on the communities, on the missions, and they were anthropologists in disguise. And I guess some of them done good in a sense. It was a benefit in disguise I guess. They were able to engage in discussion with our older people to continue the history and the survival of our people. It has happened in a lot of other tribes that lost their language and their culture. But I'm grateful it didn't happen to us, cos we were here among the mountains and our people knew their Country very very well, they would steal away from any onslaught the attempts to suppress and forbid our people even speaking language. So there are many things there that I can't even mention perhaps. (Wiangaree 24/4/10)

By way of brief explanation, Doug's great uncle Dhuroom was also known as Stan Williams, and from this we know he was one of the chief informants of both Hausfeld and Creamer in their anthropological studies, and Geytenbeek (1971) in his linguistic study. The anthropologist in disguise is a reference to Hausfeld, who was the manager of Muli Muli Aboriginal station near Woodenbong and employed by the Aborigines Welfare Board at the time of writing his anthropological thesis on Githabul culture.

Mapping hunting and food gathering places

For the Ranger group, the focus of the work explicitly avoided dealing with traditional cultural sites and spiritual stories. Instead we focused on everyday cultural practices, such as food gathering and hunting places, which towards the end of our field season we began recording onto topographic maps.

Initially I put it to them that I was interested in learning about Githabul culture and finding a way for us to put that learning process to a practical use. However this caused some unease among the group, as they took this to mean that I wanted them to tell me about the *juraveels* and other traditional cultural matters. A number of the group were young men who were still learning the knowledge about spiritual places that elders like Doug held, and while some felt that our project could provide a useful means for them to go out on Country with elders and learn some of this knowledge, others were wary. The main reason offered related to the issue of speaking about places with spiritual associations described above, with some of the Rangers again expressing the view that these were powerful places and shouldn't be taken lightly.

After some discussion however we agreed to begin pursuing the process of documenting *bing-ging* (freshwater turtle) diving places in the rivers around Kyogle. *Bing-ging* diving is a popular pastime for almost every young Githabul person I met, and an activity that the Rangers saw as being an important part of being Githabul. Some related stories of all day dives of 30 or more people, walking up the Richmond River from Wiangaree into its upper tributaries and bringing the spoils back to the Muli Muli Aboriginal station at Woodenbong to share out among the community. As well as describing a wealth of hunting and gathering activities he practiced as a teenager, GWC manager Rob Boota gave this description of *bing-ging* diving:

We used to hunt turtles, just sit in the water all day and wait for them to come up, when they came up we'd duck under and we'd swim up as close as possible to them. I guess it's a bit of an art, you've got to know when to duck under and swim up and grab them from beneath. But we wouldn't use nothing, you'd just hold your breath and come up underneath. You've got to do it in full sunlight, you couldn't do it on a cloudy day because you couldn't see too good, the waters got to be clear. (Kyogle 4/12/10)

This idea of *bing-ging* diving as a Githabul cultural practice is reinforced by the fact that it is a practice almost non-existent among the non-Indigenous population in the area. As we progressed, however, our discussions became broader and we began including the range of hunting and gathering places that the Rangers frequented.

After these discussions, the Rangers decided the next step was to take me out on a series of trips through their Country to show me some of the areas they would map, and also how to dive for turtles. Our main *bing-ging* diving trips were in the Richmond River (see Figure 5) and one of its tributaries Fingal Creek. We spent an afternoon chasing perch in Toloom Creek and they also invited me to join them for a day at a men's cultural camp they organised at Paddy's Flat on the Clarence River (see Figure 8).

Back at the GWC depot in Kyogle, large prints of topographic maps were used to mark the areas where people regularly fished, dived and hunted (see Figures 6 and 7). This started slowly, with me asking the Rangers to show them where they went so I could mark in the areas, but pretty soon they got the idea, marker pens were seized from my grasp and the mapping began.

Interviews were also carried out to provide background to the mapping. The maps and interviews indicate the extent to which Githabul have been able to maintain their day to day relationships with their Country, and show the depth of knowledge about the Country that has been retained through this.

It's worth briefly noting two details of the map which I will come back to in later discussion. Firstly, there was a high concentration of areas around Upper Toloom Creek and areas easily accessed by road from Woodenbong and Kyogle, as far down the Richmond River as Stoney Gulley. Secondly, while there were areas marked in all over Githabul Country, there were no sites recorded by the Rangers in the Duck Creek catchment or in the vicinity of Bonalbo, despite this being recognised as Githabul Country, and despite the Rangers having recalled visiting there numerous times.

Figure 5. *Bing-ging* diving, Richmond River.

Source: Photo Nick McClean.

Figure 6. Githabul Rangers mapping fishing and hunting places.

Source: Photo Nick McClean.

Figure 7. Detail of map.

Source: Photo Nick McClean.

Mapping and knowledge – comparing approaches

In terms of understanding approaches to mapping here, the first point to make is that the scope of mapping was directly influenced by the status of group members as bearers of Githabul cultural

knowledge. Most obviously, Doug Williams is in a position of recognised authority about spiritual aspects of the culture, which gives him the right to determine how and when this knowledge should be represented publicly, while the Rangers, who as individuals have varying ages and levels of cultural knowledge, did not feel they were in a position to directly deal with spiritual matters when engaging with people outside their community. The reasons for these differing levels of knowledge are possibly quite complex, however it is clear that Doug Williams is closely related to people who spent much time documenting and recording their cultural knowledge in the past, so we know that he grew up directly in an environment where he could have access to that knowledge. For the Rangers, while some are in their early 20s and state they have not yet had the chance to learn the deeper knowledge of people like Doug, others are older and do have some of this knowledge. Even so they were not willing to discuss this in much detail, seeing this as Doug's particular role within the community.¹⁰

To consider the patterns of what each process recorded, there are two significant points to be made. Firstly, that there was a concentration of sites, both spiritual and hunting/fishing, in the immediate vicinity of Woodenbong. This may seem unsurprising given that all the participants are residents of Muli Muli, just outside Woodenbong, or have lived there for a significant portion of their lives. However, this pattern is also revealed in Creamer's (1974) site recordings and sketch maps in the early 1970s, so an initial comparison of these two studies suggests there has been a significant level of knowledge retention in the Githabul community, reflecting longstanding cultural affiliations and practices in that area. Conversely, there is a notable absence of any sites recorded by participants in the catchment of Duck Creek. This was explained by the fact that the families who have the right to speak for Country in that catchment were not participants in this project, so that even if participants did have knowledge or experience of that area, they explicitly refused to discuss it, or to take me there on trips to show me the Country.

A final point to make here is that for Doug, the mapping process was wholly initiated by him and using methods rooted in Githabul cultural forms. He saw this as an expression of the uniqueness and autonomy of Githabul culture, and a direct statement against the writing of history in white terms. For the Rangers however, the mapping was initially suggested by me, the rationale was discussed as being largely within the terms of co-management (that the maps might provide useful for developing programs and projects within GWC), and that the methods used largely reflected cultural forms rooted in non-Indigenous traditions (topographic maps, GIS truthing of data, English language names). This is not to diminish the value of the maps or the information they record but it is a relevant aspect of considering the process.

Mapping and culture – understanding the terms of engagement

The most significant common factor in these mapping processes was that participants insisted that they take me out on trips to show me the Country. The centrality of being on Country in traditional spiritual practices and relations to land has been described above, and that the discussions of contemporary, everyday culture were also linked to such a process indicates a shared cultural practice amongst Githabul, regardless of cultural status. This echoes English's observation that through 'fishing, hunting, plant food collecting, camping, walking along pathways and seemingly innocuous activities like swimming or sitting round a camp fire ... [Aboriginal] people express and 'activate' their associations with place' (2002:4). This aspect of the project indicated that for Githabul, such associations with place remain an important part of their daily lives, and discussions even extended this idea, with connections to Country being seen as important for

¹⁰ Williams, pers. comm., 2010.

community health and wellbeing. While on the men's cultural camp, the Rangers encouraged me to interview one young Githabul community member (who chose to remain anonymous), and he described being on Country in this way:

Yeah I've just come out here to get back into our cultural ways, hunting and bonding with the family again. Really too, just get away from society too, where there's drugs and alcohol. Really I've come out here to focus on culture, you know? Keep bringin' the young fellas through what the old people taught us, so we can bring them up and show them how to hunt, about the culture, about the land we're on, this is Githabul land, yeah, what can I say? We're just doing a bit of turtle divin', a bit of fishin', getting some wood, like doing chores every day, getting wood for the night and that. Oh yeah having a camp like this with the family, it's good you know, having family is good, you can speak more open to your family than other people you know? Yeah good, just to realise how our old people lived. We take that in too, take it in while I'm out here, give us remembrance of our old people, how they used to live, you know, how the atmosphere is you know? It's beautiful country, wouldn't think it'd be like this eh? (Paddys Flat 01/12/11)

So the practice of being on Country is seen as central to being Githabul in a way that goes beyond ideas of cultural knowledge, cultural forms or discussions of mapping, it's even seen as a basic aspect of being a healthy, happy person in that community. For the Rangers, the mapping process we undertook was an interesting project that they were exploring for its value in their working lives, but one of its most meaningful aspects, from my observation, was that it was linked to the things they do to stay connected to their Country. As a process connected to the world of funding agencies, organisations for land management and the world of Native Title, it was something they wanted to explore to gauge its value for them. The conclusion I came to was that if they felt it didn't contribute to their being able to continue connecting to Country, to continue being out on Country, its proper value would be within their working lives and their interactions with the world outside their community, rather than as a process that maintains cultural knowledge and practices within their community.¹¹

In a similar way, Doug Williams took our discussions beyond the realm of documentation by discussing at length the connection he felt this knowledge had to Indigenous sovereignty, the idea that Indigenous people's legal title to land has never been extinguished due to the illegal nature of the occupation of the Australian continent by the British crown. While the legal debate relating to British settlement is not part of the scope of this paper, Doug described the nature of Indigenous sovereignty in the following way:

We're free people. Before *dhagay*, long long time ago, our people had ownership, title, to land, water, everything about the environment. Because of our existence, our connection to our Country. And we can describe our land, our boundaries, our stories, our law. Githabul-Ngarakbul law. Very very sacred. (Wiangaree, 24/4/10)

So in this context, showing songlines, the telling of the stories, and Doug's recording these on the kangaroo skin are not a symbolic act or a cultural display divorced from a meaningful political outcome, but are seen as the assertion of an autonomous and continuing law that underpins land ownership in Githabul-Ngarakbul Country. As a result, Doug saw the value of present day arrangements coming out of Native Title as having a positive yet ultimately limited value, and continues to pursue recognition

¹¹ Again I wish to point out that this does not diminish the value of the process, but it is relevant to understanding how and in what ways this sort of mapping can be useful. I found the Rangers to be overall quite enthusiastic about the project, while also interested to communicate the precise value of the work I proposed to them.

of sovereign ownership of Githabul lands based on the argument briefly outlined above. He states that the capacity to act as sovereigns, which includes the right to develop treaties in the political realm, will provide the basis for cultural renewal on Githabul Country.¹²

Figure 8. Githabul Men's Culture Camp at Paddys Flat, NSW.

Source: Photo Nick McClean.

Discussion and some conclusions

To turn to the issue of how the process of mapping relates to issues of cultural identity, in this case mapping and heritage recording undertaken here was assessed by Githabul participants for its value in promoting and maintaining a core aspect of Githabul life, being on Country.

To note first is that this assessment process (informal as it may seem) certainly doesn't seem unreasonable when we consider the experience of cultural mapping in other places. While Tobius (2009) presents the mapping experience for First Nations in Canada as being on the whole an empowering experience, Pramono *et al.* (2006) are less positive about its value in Indonesia, where Indigenous groups have mapped over 1,000,000 ha of traditional lands in the manner Peluso (1995) has described, and a number of other authors are interested to promote cautious and well planned approaches to mapping given the possible pitfalls of the process (e.g. Peluso 1995; Fox 1998; Deddy 2005; Chapin 2006). Some authors, such as Rundstrom (1995), even take the view that any mapping of Indigenous cultures done in Western cartographic forms represents a fundamental compromise of cultural autonomy.

¹² See also Morphy (2007:31) for a discussion of the perceived link between cultural relationships to land and the continued existence of sovereignty among Yolngu. She observes that 'the Native Title process is an arena in which, among other things, the sovereignty of a colonising society over its colonised subjects is enacted'—a view which would not be without supporters among the Githabul.

The second is that for cultural documentation in general, the demands of the Native Title era in Australia have proven influential. Here, as Merlan (2006 see also 1995, Povinelli 2002) describes, Aboriginal people must demonstrate ‘traditionality’ in terms approved of in relation to the liberal multicultural values espoused by the state in order to have formal rights to land recognised. She argues that we must move ‘beyond tradition’ as it has been conceived in Australian land rights law and instead consider fresh means of working with divergent modes of culture and land relatedness. In a similar way the Githabul response to this dynamic has been a restatement of the importance of tradition in such a way that the power to define its meaning is not yielded wholly to the state, regardless of the value system it maintains. In doing so, it also opens up its meaning to a range of issues not often associated with traditional views of cultural heritage, in this case philosophies of land, spiritual beliefs and practice, community well-being.

Mapping here appears to exist at the watershed of this divide. Such mapping techniques as counter-mapping are essentially grounded in Western terms, and their principle value exists in articulating culture in ways that are conversant with the world outside the Githabul community. Such mapping techniques as recording spiritual knowledge onto kangaroo skins serve to assert a system of law that is seen as entirely autonomous from mainstream Australian law, reminiscent of the Yolngu episode described by Morphy. That both these forms are assessed for their value through the context of maintaining a connection to Githabul Country in my opinion serves to proscribe a space in which Githabul cultural life can exist, conceived by them as functionally and experientially separate from the processes that seek to define its official limits.

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