

The Accidental Heritage

Archaeology and identity in northern Cape York

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Thesis submitted by

**Shelley Mary Greer BA(hons) *Syd*
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James Cook University of North Queensland**

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This thesis is dedicated, with love, to my mother

Alice Greer

Abstract

This thesis presents research that has been carried out in northern Cape York Peninsula. It documents the gradual shift from a conventional archaeological approach to one which addresses issues of the empowerment of indigenous (and other) people in terms of their heritage. It achieves this by tracing the development of my understanding of the contemporary cultures of northern Cape peoples through the implementation (and consequent frustrations) of the original project.

As a result of this work, present models of heritage management are questioned in terms of two broad areas. The first is related to the notion of 'consultation' and the way in which this is seen as an 'empowering' process for indigenous people. This process is examined in terms of a number of factors, including the problems of effective communication (including language difficulties) between the researcher and the communities in which they work; the history of black-white power relations on former Aboriginal reserves in Queensland; and the way in which the hegemony of western scientific perspectives may impact on contemporary notions of culture and identity. It is proposed that in northern Cape York, 'consultation' could be seen as a disempowering process.

The second major contribution of this research has been a questioning of the way in which 'heritage' has been (and currently is) defined. In northern Cape York, archaeological 'sites' are significant in terms of contemporary cosmology through the stories, beliefs and practices that are associated with them. They can be seen as 'theatrical props' and as mnemonic devices which can invoke memories and history. These memories, stories, beliefs, practices and places provide the shape and form of the 'cultural landscape'. Moreover, it can be seen that this cultural landscape is the framework upon which contemporary notions of local identity are constructed. This view of 'sites' and 'landscapes' is in contrast with scientific models of site assessment and heritage management which focus more on the distant past. While this *may* have relevance to the heirs of a culture, it is suggested that it is not, in northern Cape York, the primary concern. Alternatives, such as the 'Community-based approach', which is concerned with defining

'elements of identity' are suggested as a more appropriate focus in this area. More generally, it is suggested that the focus of heritage should be on the 'practice' rather than the 'fabric' of a culture. That is, that we should look also to the present rather than just to the past.

The research demonstrates the distance between indigenous and scientific perspectives of heritage within the context of northern Cape York and suggests that this could be examined in other contexts. An important point made in the thesis is that this 'distance' may also be observed *within* western culture. That is, that the scientific or archaeological discourse of heritage may be equally distanced from 'ordinary people' in the west.

The insights into this thesis have been drawn from interactions with people from northern Cape York. It is suggested however that my response to these interactions stemmed from the feminist perspective which informs my research. The antecedents of this feminist response can be seen in the early days of heritage management in this country and the development of an indigenous involvement in the discipline. It can also be seen in other contexts in which feminist archaeologists have worked with indigenous groups.

Finally, the relocation of heritage towards 'practice' rather than 'fabric' is of relevance in terms of the definition of native title in Australia. It recognises the dynamism of cultures by emphasising that the 'past' can only ever be in the present.