

**‘Our Way’: Social Space and the Geography of
Land Allocation Practice on the Southern Gulf
Lowlands of Cape York Peninsula**

**Thesis submitted by
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the School of Tropical Environment Studies & Geography
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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

19 November 2005

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My first introduction to the Gulf Lowlands of Cape York Peninsula was in an invitation by John Taylor, then head of Behavioural Sciences, to join him in mapping work at Pormpuraaw. That invitation was extended to me in a conversation in the car park at James Cook University over the Christmas break in 1991. Since then, I have spent more than six years 'in the field' and have benefited from the mentoring and hospitality of John and Barbara Taylor who have a 40 year long association with Pormpuraaw and Kowanyama. They are exceptional teachers and advocates of Aboriginal life. Their hospitality has included many delicious dinners which are also memorable because of the 'bush' conditions in which they were ingeniously produced.

James Cook University generously gave me two periods of study leave, whilst I was employed there as lecturer in GIS and Remote Sensing, to progress work on the development of community land information systems in the southern Gulf Lowlands. The focus of this PhD research arose out of this work in the later 1990s. I have had continued and generous support from my former colleagues at the School of Tropical Environment Studies and Geography in Townsville and Cairns including Helene Marsh, Jon Luly, Peter Valentine, Dave Gillieson and David King. I have been living in the southern Gulf Lowlands for the last two years now and JCU continue to give me a much appreciated link to the 'mainstream', as well as income, by allowing me to teach occasional courses there. The Kowanyama and Pormpuraaw Aboriginal Shire Councils gave me the opportunity to undertake natural resource assessment and land management planning tasks on their behalf between 2000 and 2003 which also provided invaluable material for this thesis.

I have often thought whilst writing this thesis that I could have arrived at similar conclusions to my research by writing the biographies of four or five of my friends in Pormpuraaw and Kowanyama. If I had done so the outcome might have been a more interesting read than an academic thesis. It would also have been an epic work of Tolstoyian proportions as people in this part of the world have had such remarkable life experiences. Many of my Aboriginal friends and colleagues here in the southern Gulf Lowlands have distilled those experiences into a way and philosophy of life that is exemplary in its humanity and compassion and in its tolerance of different cultures and points of view. This is most evident in the work that we have been doing together in recent years whereby we are attempting to reconcile local government reforms, Native Title interests and government land use policy in a way that will allow these qualities of southern Gulf Lowlands life to persevere. None of this latter work forms any part of this thesis.

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Finally, I wish my father was around to see the conclusion of this work as he could never see the point of 'all that writing'. God rest his soul and may my mother and family live long and happy lives.

ABSTRACT

This thesis reviews the geography of land allocation practice in Pormpuraaw and Kowanyama. The two communities are adjacent to each other on the southern Gulf Lowlands of Cape York Peninsula and their Aboriginal residents share many ties of kinship, though since their establishment in the earlier years of the 20th century they have had differing experiences of church mission and then State administration of their affairs. As with other rural Aboriginal communities in Queensland, their 'Deed of Grant in Trust' or DOGIT title to community lands was transferred to locally elected Community councils in 1987. This was followed in the 1990s by the establishment of homelands or outstations by kin groups and their families in their traditional homeland country. A number of historically contingent as well as traditional protocols appear to have been used in the selection of these homeland sites.

Community life is complex and the rationale that underlies decision-making on homeland allocation and land use issues is often difficult to elucidate in community land planning as decision-making can encapsulate criteria that are taken for granted and thus not referred to when people explain either their actions or aspirations. Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' (1977, 1984) is used as a conceptual framework in this thesis to explore what I propose are the implicit or taken for granted and the explicit or declared properties of landscapes in the southern Gulf Lowlands in order to explain the geography of land allocation practice that prevails there in the early 21st century.

Specifically, this thesis treats the historical and geographical interactions between the DOGIT tenure and the Aboriginal landscape, and the seasonal proximity of traditional country to the community township as core properties of implicit or unstated space. Explicit space is identified by the landmarks, places and personal geographies that people refer to when describing personal connections to traditional country or when reviewing community land management issues. My thesis is that at the convergence of these geographies there is a praxis which explains a large part of the diversity in land allocation practice on the southern Gulf Lowlands today.

In order to develop and confirm my thesis I apply concepts of 'social space' developed by Bourdieu (1977, 1984), Casey (1993, 2001), Lefebvre (1991) and Soja (1996) and their view that geographical space is not just a passive container of social relations but is a generative medium

where social practice is actively reproduced. To this end, this thesis develops a series of cartographic models which use kinship models of social organisation and ethno-archaeological models of the spatial organisation of land use to project the properties of social space onto the physical spaces of the townscapes and landscapes of the southern Gulf Lowlands. The topology of social space is reproduced at three levels of emplacement in patterns of household residency in the townscape; in land use and homeland affiliation in the landscape, and in personal space and the daily life of personal relationships and of work and recreation. The relative congruence or disjuncture between these modeled spaces provide direct insights into processes that underlie the geography of land allocation practice in Kowanyama and Pormpuraaw.

Differences in land allocation practice between Kowanyama and Pormpuraaw, which are identified in both the implicit and explicit properties of social space in each community, are complemented by a marked congruity between their respective mapped landscapes and townscapes. Local variations in practice are also identified in implicit space within each community, in landscape units that have their latency in either the seasonal properties of the Aboriginal landscape, the coincident mainstream DOGIT tenure or their proximity to the township.

Explicit space is filled with a comprehensive knowledge of the environmental properties of the southern Gulf Lowlands that is referenced to geography of European and Aboriginal places and landmarks in the region. People used differing kinds of landmark knowledge, depending on their clan or tribe affiliation and their age or their life experiences, to describe their homeland country as well as the wider region. Everybody has their own personal suite of person- place – social space relationships that define their homeland, tribe or community affiliation. As a result of generational differences in landscape knowledge between people, there may be a variety of person-place-space topologies in any homeland group but they all refer to a common geographical space and shared identity. The social spaces which these topologies refer to are stable over time and present day homeland spaces correspond with those clan estates and tribal domains mapped by anthropologists in the 20th century. The underlying geometry of traditional country is immutable, as it is central to indigenous perceptions of social space in the southern Gulf Lowlands. It is only the suite of places or landmarks that people use to map themselves onto the landscape that changes over time. This geography is part of a continuous process of innovation and re-creation in southern Gulf Lowlands society. It is also the core spatial praxis that

links implicit space and explicit space and reconciles local and introduced tenures in local land allocation practice.

The primary motive for the maintenance of person-place-space relationships is the affirmation of Aboriginal identity. Social space is both egocentric and sociocentric. Any person may possess different assemblages of person-place-space relationships at homeland, tribal, community and regional scales of social aggregation. Hence, in principle each person may have their own unique 'private geography' that enhances individuation and personal as well as social identity across all geographical scales of social space. This spatial praxis is part of a wide repertoire of strategies that is used by Aboriginal people to cope with mainstream Australia and the attendant roles that are occasionally placed on them as objects of academic research or policy-making or as service recipients. It appears, in the early years of the 21st century, that the geographies which were created by Aboriginal people as a result of 20th century colonisation of western Cape York Peninsula are very localised and specialised adaptations to local historical and geographical circumstances, and are unlikely to ever change again: if so, then this diversity and immutability have considerable implications for the future development of land policy in the region. This thesis concludes with a consideration of the unique roles that geography and cartography have in socially inclusive regional and community scale Aboriginal land planning in North Australia.

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ACRONYMS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics.
ADC	Aboriginal Development Corporation.
CYPDA	Cape York Peninsula Development Association.
CYPLUS	Cape York Peninsula Land Use Study.
DAIA	Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs.
DFCS	Queensland Department of Family and Community Services.
DOGIT	Deed of Grant in Trust. A form of land title granted by the Queensland government.
GIS	Geographic Information System.
JCU	James Cook University, Queensland.
KLNRMO	Kowanyama Land and Natural Resource Management Office.
LANDSAT TM	LANDSAT Thematic Mapper Earth Resource Observation Satellite
LANDSAT MSS	LANDSAT Multispectral Scanner Earth Resource Observation Satellite
NHT	Australian Natural Heritage Trust