



Co-motion: Making space to care for country

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 November 2013

Received in revised form 6 April 2014

Available online 16 May 2014

Keywords:

Indigenous

Ontology

NRM

Caring for Country

Cross-cultural

Yolngu

ABSTRACT

Ontological differences between mainstream 'Natural Resource Management' (NRM) and Indigenous Australian 'Caring for Country' are an often invisible but complicating factor in cross-cultural collaborations in land and sea management. In an effort to be included, or to include, Indigenous peoples and their estates in NRM funding, many Indigenous groups have framed their caring for country activities as NRM. Indeed, much of the funding available to Indigenous ranger groups is to pursue mainstream NRM outcomes. Consequently, institutional structures and funding arrangements have not effectively recognised or supported caring for country on its own terms. Contextualised through experiences of the Yolngu people in NE Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia, this paper aims to render visible and challengeable the hidden ontological dominance of Enlightenment knowledge in land and sea management discourses and the inadequacy of these universalisms to respect and honour ontological difference. It highlights the invisibility of power to cultures of power and its implications for managing cross-cultural institutions. Esteva's (1987) concept of co-motion, of moving together, is then applied to the land and sea management context as an opportunity for opening institutional and administrative spaces to allow for self-determination to care for country, and thus, for equitable and meaningful collaborations between cultures.

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Introduction

'*Ganma* is firstly a place; it is an area within the mangroves where the salt water coming in from the sea meets the stream of fresh water coming down from the land. *Ganma* is a still lagoon. The water circulates silently underneath, and there are lines of foam circulating across the surface. The swelling and retreating of the tides and the wet season floods can be seen in the two bodies of the water. Water is often taken to represent knowledge in Yolngu philosophy. What we see happening is a process of knowledge production where we have two different cultures, Balanda (non-Indigenous) and Yolngu, working together. Both cultures need to be presented in a way where each one is preserved and respected' (Marika, 1998, 7).

'This process of making knowledge of one world available in another is familiar practice for us. In Yolngu society there is negotiation of meanings between the two moieties, Dhuwa and Yirritja, which can be applied to negotiation between Yolngu and Balanda cultures to find the common ground' (Marika and Ngurruwutthun, 1992, 30).

These words from the late Dr. Marika-Mununggiritj and Ngurruwutthun discuss the *ganma* metaphor to demonstrate the importance and opportunity in bringing together two worlds of knowledge, Yolngu knowledge from their people and Balanda or non-Indigenous knowledge. Their message is uncompromising on the need to respect and value both cultures and knowledges equitably in a spirit of mutual respect and trust, protecting and respecting both ways of learning. This paper seeks to respond to this message by considering opportunities to pursue equitable collaboration between two worlds of knowledge with respect to Indigenous land and sea management in Australia, using the *ganma* metaphor as a philosophical starting point.

This paper draws on research done alongside and with the support and guidance of Yolngu scholars and institutions in north-east Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia (see Fig. 1) and as part of a discursive community of scholars in geography and environmental studies. In particular I worked with Dhimurru, a Yolngu land and sea management organisation established by traditional owners that embraces a 'two-way' philosophy of working between Yolngu and non-Indigenous knowledges (for more detail see Muller, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2012). My research focused on the implications of procedures for funding and accountability in land and sea management and considered how governments and other funding providers could support Yolngu on terms authorised

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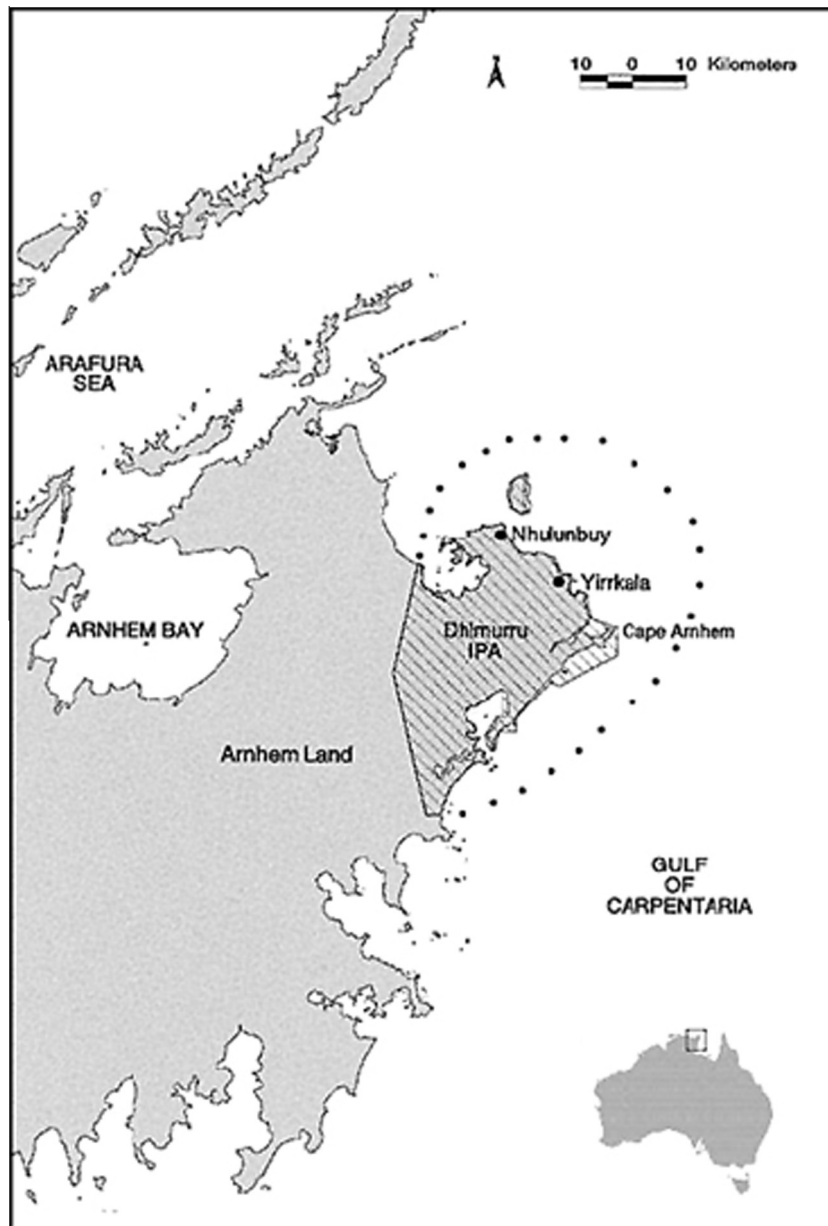


Fig. 1. Location of Dhimurru Indigenous Protected Area. The square on the inset map of Australia shows the location of Arnhem Land.

within Yolngu systems, rather than always prescribing compliance with mainstream values and systems and disciplining the thinking that underpinned funding requests, project proposals and accountability mechanisms to the contours and understandings of an Enlightenment epistemology. In this paper I draw on that argument to consider its wider implications.

This paper aims to render visible and challengeable the hidden ontological dominance of Enlightenment thinking in land and sea management discourses. It highlights key differences between Indigenous ‘caring for country’ and ‘natural resource management,’ not to create a binary or romanticize the Indigenous position as superior; rather to unsettle the dominance of Enlightenment discourses to open spaces for ontological pluralism (see Howitt and Suchet-Pearson, 2006). Indeed, in Yolngu frameworks binaries are not construed as oppositional but as ‘complementary, or mutually constitutive’ (Morphy and Morphy, 2009, 17). By engaging with the specificity of Yolngu land and sea management, this paper demonstrates the co-existence of multiple ontologies in place and the

inadequacy of Enlightenment universalisms to respect and honour those differences. I argue that a focus on process and relationships is fundamental to achieving meaningful self-determination and ontological pluralism in Indigenous land and sea management. The concept of co-motion is then considered as an opportunity for opening institutional and administrative spaces to allow for self-determination to care for country. Respecting and enabling Indigenous land and sea management to operate on its own terms, even if those terms do not make sense to dominant culture, is what is necessary for equitable and meaningful collaborations between cultures, as discussed in the *ganma* metaphor.

Invisible ontological domination in natural resource management

Ontological differences between mainstream ‘Natural Resource Management’ (NRM) and Indigenous Australian ‘Caring for Country’ are an often invisible but complicating factor in cross-cultural

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