Yamani Country
A Spatial History of the Atherton Tableland, North Queensland

Sandra Pannell
with contributions from Ngadjon-Jii Traditional Owners
YAMANI COUNTRY

A SPATIAL HISTORY OF THE
ATHERTON TABLELAND, NORTH QUEENSLAND

Sandra Pannell
Rainforest CRC, James Cook University, Cairns

with contributions from Ngadjon-Jii Traditional Owners
Emma Johnston, Ernie Raymont, Jessie Calico,
Yvonne Canendo, Warren Canendo, Trevor Johnston,
Billie Jean Johnston and Stanley Morta

Rainforest CRC

Established and supported under the
Australian Cooperative Research Centres Program
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

From a personal perspective, this volume has its origins in the mid 1990s, when I first met many of the Ngadjon-Jii people whose words and stories appear on the following pages. It was on this occasion that I met Auntie Emma Johnston, her children, Trevor Johnston and Yvonne Canendo, Uncle Ernie Raymont, Auntie Jessie Calico, Auntie May Morta and her sister, Ena Gertz, and some of the younger generation of Ngadjon-Jii people, Warren Canendo, Billie-Jean Johnston, Eliza Morta, and Vanessa Gertz. To these people, and the other Ngadjon-Jii people who taught me something about the tangled histories of the Tableland, I am deeply grateful.

It was at our initial meeting on the shores of Lake Eacham that I first heard about Yamani. Seeing a strange ripple in the water, Auntie May Morta, now deceased, looked at the dark surface of the lake and talked about that “old Yamani, too big for a snake, too big for an eel”. I was to hear and record many more stories about Yamani in the years that followed, as we talked about and travelled around Ngadjon-Jii country as part of research for a Native Title claim. In the course of these conversations with Ngadjon-Jii people, some of which took place sitting around the kitchen table at Yvonne’s place in Malanda, while others occurred in rainforest pockets and cleared paddocks around the district, it became apparent that the places we visited with memories and a motor car were complex cultural constructs. It also became clear that to speak and write about the spatial history of Ngadjon-Jii people and their country required a different setting than the one provided by the legal parameters of Native Title.

In late 2002, we sat down once again and talked about a different kind of project to record stories about country and kin. These stories appear throughout this document in the form of excerpted transcripts of the original digital audio recordings. Some of our conversations and travels in the ensuing period, 2003-2005, formed part of a research project funded by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and the Rainforest Cooperative Research Centre (Rainforest CRC). I would like to acknowledge the support and encouragement received from both of these organisations. Special thanks are due to Birgit Kuehn and Shannon Hogan at the Rainforest CRC for their untiring efforts and enthusiasm in preparing the volume for publication.

In researching this book, I also spent some time exploring the archives of the Cairns Historical Society. I am thankful to the many volunteers at the Society who offered help and assistance on these occasions.

In the two years spent researching this book, a number of Ngadjon-Jii elders have passed away. The loss of Uncle Henry Robinson, Auntie Jessie Calico and Bundji Trevor Johnston was deeply felt by the Aboriginal community on the Atherton Tableland. In preparing this volume, I reviewed some of the digital videotapes we had recorded, featuring Auntie Jessie and Trevor. While saddened by their deaths, I was also reminded of their determination to make sure that another kind of history was told about the Atherton uplands. This book is a realisation of that determination, and is dedicated to their memory and spirit.

Dr Sandra Pannell  
Leader, Program 7  
Rainforest CRC
NOTES ON ORTHOGRAPHY AND KINSHIP TERMINOLOGY

For the sake of linguistic consistency, I largely follow R. M. W. Dixon’s orthography for the ‘Dyirbal’ language and its six constituent dialects, including ‘Ngadyan’ (1972). According to Dixon, the phonological features of Dyirbal are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(Unmarked) lingual</th>
<th>Front (marked) lingual</th>
<th>Back (marked) lingual</th>
<th>Labial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stop</strong></td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Ɂ</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nasal</strong></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>ɲ</td>
<td>m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Liquid</strong></td>
<td>L</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>ř</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Semi-vowel</strong></td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>w</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vowel</strong></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>ɪ</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>u</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the available anthropological and linguistic material, a number of different orthographies are used to record the term ‘Ngadjon-Jii’. Norman Tindale, for example, identifies fifteen alternative terms to describe this group of Aboriginal people (1974: 183). In his earlier writing, R. M. W. Dixon describes the language spoken by Emma Johnston and her family using the terms, ‘Ngadjan’ (1972) or ‘Ngadan’ (1976). Dixon identifies the group itself with the labels ‘Ngadanjdji’ or ‘Ngadyandyi’ (1980). In later writings, Dixon tends to use the terms ‘Ngajan’ (1982, 1996) and ‘Ngajanji’ (1980) when respectively describing the language and the group, although ‘Ngajan’ is frequently employed as a gloss for both in his 1996 publication on ‘Dyirbal Song Poetry’.

As these comments indicate, inconsistency appears to mark the anthropological and linguistic record regarding the nomenclature used to describe Ngadjon-Jii people and their way of speaking. In keeping with Ngadjon-Jii people’s use and orthographic practices, and to avoid the confusion in the written record about ‘tribal’ and language names, throughout this volume I use the appellation ‘Ngadjon-Jii’ to denote the people, their language, their country and their culture.

As Dixon reports, Ngadjon-Jii people, like other Dyirbal language group speakers, acknowledge a number of kinship relationships and categories (Dixon 1996). While Ngadjon-Jii people are familiar with this Indigenous system of kinship classification and terminology, they also use English terms to gloss some of these egocentric kinship relations. It is important to realise here that Anglo-Australian kin terms, such as ‘Auntie’ or ‘Granny’, are not consistent with Ngadjon-Jii kin categories where, for example, four sets of ‘Grannies’ are terminologically distinguished (i.e. bulu [FF], babi [FM], gumbul [MM], ngargi [MF]). Ngadjon-Jii people also use Anglo-Australian kin terms socio-centrically as honorifics for men and women who are regarded as ‘elders’ or as being somehow ‘senior’ to the speaker. Throughout this volume, I follow this practice and refer to individuals, such as Emma Johnston and Ernie Raymont, with the appropriate anglicised term of respect.

---

1 In line with anthropological convention regarding the study of kinship systems, the following abbreviations and glosses are used: FF (Father’s Father), FM (Father’s Mother), MM (Mother’s Mother), and MF (Mother’s Father).
CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................... i
Notes on Orthography and Kinship Terminology ................................................................. ii
Maps........................................................................................................................................ iv
Photographs ........................................................................................................................... v

CHAPTER ONE – THE LIE OF THE LAND ............................................................................1
Environmental Histories of Settled Australia .......................................................................3
Towards a History of Cultural Spaces.................................................................................. 4

CHAPTER TWO – YAMANI ..............................................................................................7
Barriny .................................................................................................................................. 9
Djilan .................................................................................................................................... 11
Gubi ..................................................................................................................................... 14
Buluba Burrguna ................................................................................................................ 16
Warma .................................................................................................................................. 21
Conclusion ........................................................................................................................... 26

CHAPTER THREE – NATURE IN NAMES ...........................................................................29
Natural Foundations: Christie Palmerston and the Mineralogical Fantasy .......................30
Meaningless Names and a Pleasing Geographical Nomenclature...................................34
Conclusion ........................................................................................................................... 37

CHAPTER FOUR – LAYING BARE THE BONES OF THE SNAKE ....................................39
The ‘King’ of Boonjie .......................................................................................................... 40
The Creation of Aboriginal Labour .................................................................................... 45
The Old People’s Track .................................................................................................... 50
Back to Boonjie ................................................................................................................. 52
Conclusion ........................................................................................................................... 53

CHAPTER FIVE – ON THE FARM ........................................................................................55
Into the Clearing .................................................................................................................. 58
Living with Miss Raymont ................................................................................................. 64
Conclusion ........................................................................................................................... 70

CHAPTER SIX – BUYU ....................................................................................................73
Buyu ..................................................................................................................................... 75
Living on the Edge ............................................................................................................. 76
Midja in the Midst .............................................................................................................. 78
Living in Change ................................................................................................................. 82
Edge Effects ....................................................................................................................... 85
Impacts and Threats ......................................................................................................... 87
New Spaces, Old Places .................................................................................................... 88
CHAPTER SEVEN – AFTERWORD .................................................................................91

In the Chamber ............................................................................................................91

A Landscape of Historical Leftovers ........................................................................93

REFERENCES ..............................................................................................................95

MAPS

Map 1: The Malanda District of the Atherton Tableland, North Queensland ............5
Map 2: Allocated selections in the Parish of Malanda, 1911 .................................56
PHOTOGRAPHS

Figure 1: ‘Aboriginal group, Bellenden-Ker, with shields, spears and boomerangs’ ........... 1
Figure 2: Mosaic-tiled mural, Malanda Conservation Park ............................................. 7
Figure 3: The creation of Barriny – Lake Barrine ............................................................ 9
Figure 4: Yvonne Canendo and Auntie Emma Johnston at Buluba Burrguna .................... 17
Figure 5: New signage at Buluba Burrguna: Cultural and Natural Protection Area ....... 20
Figure 6: ‘Blanket Issue Day for Aborigines’, Atherton, ca. 1914 ................................. 22
Figure 7: ‘Aboriginal climbing tree in English’s Jungle Avenue, Malanda’ ....................... 23
Figure 8: ‘Aboriginals at their Natural Huts, English’s Jungle Avenue, Malanda, 1930s’ ... 25
Figure 9: Statue of ‘Christie Palmerston and his Aboriginal Companion Pompo’ at Millaa Millaa, Atherton Tableland ......................................................... 37
Figure 10: ‘Gold sluicing at Union Gold Mine, Russell River, 1890s’ ......................... 39
Figure 11: Molly Raymond, Malanda, ca. early 1990s ...................................................... 40
Figure 12: ‘A group of Aborigines, Upper Russell River 1895, with implements and body markings’ ................................................................. 41
Figure 13: ‘Aboriginal mummy of King Narcha of the Boonjie Tribe, 1890s’ ................. 44
Figure 14: ‘Sluicing gold at the Mayflower Claim on the Russell River using hydraulic sluicing’ .................................................................................... 46
Figure 15: ‘The Raymont Brothers with Aboriginal workers, ca. 1920, Malanda’ ........ 55
Figure 16: ‘Coffee plantation 1900, Russell River’ ....................................................... 57
Figure 17: ‘Charlie Watson, 1912-14, outside his Malanda hut posing with three Negroid men’ (from Mjöberg 1918) ......................................................... 59
Figure 18: ‘Burning off scrub, Malanda 1907 at G. Plath’s farm’ ............................... 60
Figure 19: ‘Large felled tree, Malanda, ready to be transported to the sawmill’ ............. 61
Figure 20: ‘View of Malanda, 1934’ ............................................................................. 62
Figure 21: Aerial photograph of Glen Allyn, indicating location of the Raymont Farm and Nabanaba ................................................................. 64
Figure 22: ‘An Aboriginal camp, Atherton Tableland, showing mia mia [midja] and dilly bag’ .................................................................................. 65
Figure 23: Auntie Emma Johnston at Raymont’s Farm, August 2005 ......................... 67
Figure 24: Ngadjon-Jii people and the Midja they built in the Malanda Conservation Park, 2002 ................................................................. 73
Figure 25: Molly Raymond standing in front of J. K.’s Farm, ca. 1960s ....................... 78
Figure 26: The Aboriginal Settlement in Malanda, ca. mid 1990s ................................ 82
Figure 27: Location of Ngadjon-Jii camps and dwellings, and other places of historical significance in Malanda ..................................................... 88
Figure 28: Trevor Johnston, holding his grandson, with his mother Emma Johnston outside their Besser Block ‘camp’ on the outskirts of Malanda, ca. early 2000 .................................................. 89
Figure 29: Djura Djilam – Mt Bartle Frere, taken from Lamins Hill ................................ 91