



# Yamani Country

A Spatial History of the  
Atherton Tableland,  
North Queensland

Sandra Pannell

with contributions from  
Ngadjon-Jii Traditional Owners



# Rainforest CRC

Cooperative Research Centre for Tropical Rainforest Ecology and Management



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## 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



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*(Top)* Painting (detail) by Warren Canendo, depicting the creation of the volcanic cones known as the 'Seven Sisters'. Image: Roger Wilkinson.

*(Centre)* Aerial photograph of Malanda. Image: Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Mines.

*(Bottom)* Painting by Warren Canendo, depicting *Djura Djilam* (Mt Bartle Frere), regarded as the spiritual 'home' of the Ngadjon-Jii people. Image: Roger Wilkinson.

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This document contains language and expressions that some readers may find offensive.

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People should be warned that this document contains images of deceased persons.

## 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.

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## 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:

	(Unmarked) lingual	Front (marked) lingual	Back (marked) lingual	Labial
Stop	D	ɖ	G	b
Nasal	N	ɲ	ŋ	m
Liquid	L	R	ɾ	
Semi-vowel	W	Y	W	w
Vowel	A	I	U	u

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, 'Ngadyan' (1972) or 'Ngadjan' (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]<sup>1</sup>). Ngadjon-Jii people also use Anglo-Australian kin terms socio-centrally 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.

<sup>1</sup> 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).

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