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Conclusion

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It has become a truism that classical Australian societies employed among the simplest ranges of material technology found among the world's peoples, yet they also developed perhaps the most complex systems of kinship relations ever recorded.

In the present study, we have added to the evidence of high sociocultural elaboration first established by kinship studies of Aboriginal Australia. Linguistic organisation is a comparable classical field of rich elaboration. We have complemented the few descriptions of comparable socio-linguistic complexity from other regions, especially that of north-east Arnhem Land (e.g. Schebeck 2001). These studies have been carried out in regions less heavily impacted by colonisation than others, and they suggest the likelihood that comparably complex orderings of Aboriginal linguistic geopolitics and their interweaving with traditional religion and cosmology were once found in all parts of Australia.

Ethnographic mapping of the kind we have employed here largely begins with the specific site, and works upward from there to where collectivities of those sites constitute larger entities, including the clan estate. The clan estate in the Wik Region is in classical terms the elementary linguistic country unit, and the linguistic identities of people are conferred by birth into a clan whose estate holds that language from its creation. Only by mapping a significant number of specific sites in an estate can one be precise about where that estate begins and ends. Only by having specific

data on where estates of a common language begin and end can one be precise about where a broad language country or 'tribal territory', in the sense of Tindale (1974), might extend to. It also reveals cases where there is no single continuous country associated with a particular language or dialect. Environmentally based shared geopolitical identities also can only be precisely described on the basis of detailed mapping of estates onto ecological zones and watercourse systems.

In this way, we have in effect proceeded in reverse to the kind of ethnography that begins with the broad language country or 'tribal territory' and looks for language boundaries and then personal membership of the language group. This makes a point that can often be generalised in the Aboriginal case: that complicated nested sociocultural structures are better analysed not as macro-groups with subdivisions, but as micro-entities that are collocated in increasing scales to constitute broader social and cultural identities.

Rather than merely present generalisations, with perhaps cherry-picked examples as supporting evidence, we have chosen here both to describe the salient aspects of the classical linguistic anthropology of the Wik Region and also to present much of the ethnographic detail that underpins that description. For the descendants of the Old People whose cultures are glimpsed here, the factual details will outlive academic analyses by a very long time, and be far more important from the beginning. Offering factual details here will also allow future scholars to revisit the data and come to their own, hopefully more advanced, conclusions.

This study rests critically on the articulation of intensive and geographically extensive ethnographic field mapping by anthropologists with comparative and historical studies of the Wik Region's languages by linguists. Just as critically it rests on the dedication of Wik people to the task of mentoring the anthropologists and linguists. Much of that mentoring took place under remote and physically arduous conditions, as the Wik land tenure system and its interlocking with linguistic geography could only be studied in detail by relying on a rich basis of ethnographic mapping carried out on the ground, travelling by four-wheel drive, by dinghy, on foot, by plane, by helicopter, and on horseback.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the extent to which classical Cape York Peninsula peoples were obsessed with language. Whether it was in the domains of geopolitics, local organisation, landscape mythology, speech etiquette, singing, place-names, naming of people and their dogs, narrative traditions, joking, or verbal combat, they were unsurpassed among First Australians in the elaboration of everything to do with language. The loss of so much of this baroque heritage as daily practice is only weakly compensated for by the richness of the record.