

Land and Language in Cape York Peninsula and the Gulf Country

edited by Jean-Christophe Verstraete and Diane Hafner

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Review by Fiona Powell

This volume is number 18 in the series Culture and Language Use (CLU), Studies in Anthropological Linguistics, edited by Gunter Seft of the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen. It is a Festschrift for Emeritus Professor Bruce Rigsby. His contributions to anthropology during his tenure as professor at the University of Queensland from 1975 until 2000 and his contributions to native title have profoundly enriched the lives of his students, his colleagues and the Aboriginal people of Cape York.

The editors and the contributors have produced a volume of significant scholarship in honour of Bruce Rigsby. As mentioned by the editors: 'it is difficult to do justice to even the Australian part of Bruce's work, because he has worked on such a wide range of topics and across the boundaries of disciplines' (p. 9).

The introductory chapter outlines the development of the Queensland School of Anthropology since 1975. Then follow 19 original articles contributed by 24 scholars. The articles are arranged in five sections (Reconstructions, World Views, Contacts and Contrasts, Transformations and Repatriations). At the beginning of the volume there are two general maps (Map 1 of Queensland and Map 2 of Cape York Peninsula and the Gulf Country) both showing locations mentioned in the text. There are three indexes: of places (pp. 481–82; languages, language families and groups (pp. 483–85); and general matters (pp. 487–92). The volume is further enhanced by the inclusion of other maps and illustrations in several articles.

The research histories of a number of contributors indicate the influence of Bruce Rigsby. Several are former students – David Trigger, Diane Hafner, Chris Anderson, Peter Sutton and David Thompson. Full appreciation of all 19 articles requires some expertise in all the four fields of the Queensland School. From the point of view of sociocultural anthropology and social history I found the articles by Paul Memmott, Erich Round, Daniel Rosendahl and Sean Ulm of particular interest, and I wish there were the resources, time and expertise to record similar data for other places in Cape York and the Gulf Country. Drawing on all four fields, their contribution presents a hypothetical model of changing linguistic and territorial arrangements across the Wellesley region over the last several thousand years.

The introductory chapter 'Land and Language in Cape York Peninsula and the Gulf Country' by Jean-Christophe Verstraete and Diane Hafner gives an informative overview of the development of anthropology at the University of Queensland under the stewardship of Bruce Rigsby. However, the reference to Ursula McConnel (p. 6) omits mention of her important work in south-east Cape York and her contribution to the mapping of languages and language-named groups in Cape York.

The first section, Reconstructions, draws on articles that in one way or another demonstrate the four fields of the Queensland School. The first contributor is the linguist Barry Alpher. His article 'Connection Thaypanic' draws on Bruce Rigsby's study of 'Aboriginal languages in their social context'. It is of importance to discover in what circumstances and from whom ownership and/or speaking facility in various languages was acquired, and to use these data to map language diffusion. This article is of major significance: it sets out the basis for the construction of a particular genetic group of languages (Alaya-Athima) and suggests links of this with east coast languages, in particular Kuku-Yalanji and possibly Guugu Yimithirr, Djabugay-Yidiny. Having worked with speakers of these languages I think that any comparative linguistic study would be enhanced by taking into consideration these speakers' intertwined social histories.

Noelene Cole's article draws on the knowledge of George Musgrave, Bruce Rigsby and Peter Sutton about Stories (p. 73) and finds that 'the Laura Basin rock art, like totemic systems, functioned as a symbol of cultural identity' (pp. 73–74), and that 'the unity of Quinkan rock art style testifies to a cohesive, relatively wide-ranging social and territorial network of clans and land using groups with related languages and shared identities' (p. 76). Her article indicates there is much more research to be done, in order to understand the 'complex history and articulation of rock art style in the Laura Basin' (p. 78).

The findings of Peter Sutton's informative contribution 'The Flinders Island and Cape Melville People in History' in relation to traditional affiliations, the clan system and landownership, and relationships between groups is applicable to the Cooktown–Cape Bedford region. On p. 90 there is mention of the 'killing by Aborigines of Mary Watson at Lizard Island in 1881' that is sourced from Robertson (1981). Mary Watson fled Lizard Island with her baby son and a Chinese servant after the island was attacked by Aborigines. All three died of thirst on No. 5 Island in the Howick Group not far from Cape Flattery.

The article 'Fission, Fusion and Syncretism' by Memmott et al. draws on linguistic, archaeological and environmental data to outline a hypothetical model of changing linguistic and territorial arrangements across the Wellesley region over the last several thousand years. This fascinating article, with its concepts of fusion, fission and syncretism suggests a resurgence of interest in sociocultural change and continuities that were key areas of interest of the University of Queensland's first Department of Anthropology. The authors' identification of a linguistic-cultural event 'which we term "syncretism"' (p. 119) may be a useful tool for anthropologists working in the native title arena in situations of conjoint or seemingly overlapping claims of ownership.

Section II, World Views, contains one anthropological contribution (by Benjamin Smith) and three articles by linguists or linguistic anthropologists. Through work relating to the transfer of freehold title to Batavia Downs to the Northern Kaanji, Atambaya and Yinwum-language-named groups (mentioned in footnote 28, p. 155), Benjamin Smith's analysis of personhood amongst the Northern Kannju shows the value of the Thomson archival field data and the importance of taking note of Indigenous metaphors with respect to explicating social organisation. As noted on p. 150, 'filiation' rather than 'descent' is the keystone to understanding the serial accession to ownership of a particular set of places or country.

Lacking linguistic expertise, I hesitate to comment on the articles by Alice Gaby (Hyponymy and the Structure of Kuuk Thaayorre Kinship), Mary Laughren (Possession in Kuuku-Thaypen through a Comparative Lens) and Francesca Merlan (Correlation of Textual and Spatial Reference This and That). I found Alice Gaby's article interesting in that it gives a new perspective to these systems by including consideration of all four registers (referential, vocative, bereavement and gestural). Francesca Merlan states on p. 15 that the language discussed in her article, Jowayn, is a Gunwinyguan language 'just outside our area of interest (but from a family of languages well-represented in the western and northwestern Gulf of Carpentaria'. This work is of general linguistic interest.

The contributions by three outstanding anthropologists and a well-known historian mean Section III, Contacts and Narratives, is likely to appeal not only to specialists but also the general reader. Marcia Langton's contribution 'Botanists, Aborigines and Native Plants on the Queensland Frontier' took me back to my recording from an elderly Yidindyi speaker of her people's slow death by starvation after the destruction of much of their food supplies for cane farming. This important article draws attention to the 'introduced diseases and cumulative effects of dispossession (including destruction of traditional food sources, which resulted in malnutrition' (p. 223) and the 'starvation that befell so many groups as their traditional economy collapsed' (p. 238). The legislation that resulted in land clearing and the killing of 'feral' animals (including possums, koalas, kangaroos), and the impact this legislation had for Aboriginal people trying to survive in the bush are matters that should be considered by anthropologists working on native title claims. There is no mention in Marcia Langton's article of Eric Mjoberg's 1913 field excursion in Cape York, from Laura to the Alice River region, perhaps because this information was not available when the article was prepared. The reference to the establishment of the Lutheran mission at Cape Bedford in 1904 (p. 228) is an error; this mission was established in 1886. It is clear that the ration system became the dominant source of sustenance for the Aboriginal inhabitants of mission reserves; this should be understood not only in relation to the loss of customary sources of food, but also to the desire of Aboriginal parents to maintain contact with their children, who were held in the mission's dormitories. In this respect, there is anecdotal evidence collected during native title research that the implementation of the Education Act also contributed to changes in Aboriginal people's accessing of customary bush foods.

I found Chris Anderson's contribution 'Multiple Views of Paradise: Perspective on the Daintree Rainforest' very interesting. When I revisited Bloomfield River in 2007, I was astonished at the extent of the devastation of this region through land clearing and closer settlement, but not surprised. These developments were in train even in 1970, when the local Aboriginal people who at that time lived in camps along the Bloomfield River were being encouraged to move to the newly formed 'Top Camp' (now known as 'WujalWujal').

Chris Anderson's representation of parallel universes raises the question of how they could best interface. At the end of his contribution he acknowledges Bruce Rigsby 'for bringing me to an analysis where language (labelling) and culture (how one thinks about the world around) plus a power imbalance can create the exclusion of whole peoples and their way of life' (p. 282). The question arises: how can this be redressed? Perhaps the time has come for Kuku-Yalanji people to follow their Guugu-Yimithirr neighbours and conduct their own tours,

and thus make visible what has been concealed for so long: 'their thoughts, perspectives and views ... in the discourse of conservation and eco-tourism' (p. 280).

David Trigger's contribution 'Shared Country, Different Stories' presents a case study of such a situation. This emerged during a workshop of local writers held at Burketown to discuss cultural belonging (p. 288). This article provides readers with a glimpse of the rich social history of the Gulf of Carpentaria and the overlapping, competing stories of connection of its inhabitants. The mentions of Bruce Rigsby's seminal paper about Indigenous and 'non-Indigenous' (pp. 285, 299, 300) relate not only to the issues now confronting Australia's non-Indigenous, as the continent's Aboriginal history is disseminated via the settlement of native title cases, but also to issues arising from interpretations of the term 'native' sometimes encountered in early genealogical records.

Section IV, Transformations, allows the reader to revisit some of the people and places encountered earlier in this volume and to explore others. The reader is then transported with the Nic Evans article back to the Wellesley Islands, and with Ray Wood's article back to the Kuku-Yalanji people. The article 'Same But Different' by Ilana Mushin, Denise Angelo and Jennifer Munro takes us to the Aboriginal settlements of Cherbourg, Woorabinda and Yarrabah, where people removed from locations in Cape York were sent. From there, the reader is introduced through contributions by David Thomson and Helen Harper to people associated respectively with Lockhart River on the east coast of Cape York and Bamaga, at the top of Cape York. Nic Evans's article explores transformations and continuities in naming systems and gives the reader a glimpse of what it's like to be a Kaiadilt Bentinck Islander and how despite changes, current personal naming practices continue to connect people to country and family line.

Ray Wood draws on the concept of 'shifter' terms, which Bruce Rigsby introduced into Australian anthropology in his unpublished and published work (see footnote 12 on p. 347). With its focus on issues associated with interpreting the meaning of 'Kuku Buyunji' and related labels found in archival materials and during field research, Ray Wood highlights the importance of context when explicating the meaning of such terms.

David Thomson's 'Going Forward Holding Back' describes how Lockhart people incorporate those aspects of new lifestyles and technologies that do not interfere with 'their foundational family solidarities and customs' (p. 379). 'Same but different', mentioned above, sets out the authors' findings about similarities and differences between the contemporary vernaculars of Cherbourg, Woorabinda and Yarrabah. Perhaps their further research may extend into Cape York, and encompass the consideration of contemporary vernaculars of Palm Island where numbers of people were sent from Cape York and the Gulf Country (as well as

other places) and the former mission stations of Mapoon and Hope Vale, both of which had the dormitory system. At least until the 1970s bilingualism prevailed at Hope Vale, and some of the oldest residents could read and write in both Guugu Yimithirr and English. The final article in this section – ‘The Story of Old Man Frank’ – takes the reader into the world of the late Goodie Massey. He was the brother of the late Miriam Crowe, a major consultant with Atambaya and associated peoples. He was also related to Larry Macdonald, who assisted with Bruce Rigsby’s work at Bamaga.

With respect to language maintenance at Injinoo, while it is true that Jomen Tamwoy strictly enforced the official policy relating to the speaking of traditional languages by school children (p. 415), I found anecdotal evidence from older Injinoo people that they circumvented this policy by singing in ‘Langgus’.

The two articles in the final section of this volume, Repatriations, show that it is not a straightforward process. While Lindy Allen, who has worked closely with Bruce Rigsby and Diane Hafner, has been able to assist the Lama Lama people reclaim their cultural property, John Haviland found that the time was not right for those he hoped would take possession of what he held and regarded as their cultural property.

John Haviland’s article completes the reader’s journey into Cape York and the Gulf Country. It shows how linguistics and anthropology are inextricably linked through their focus on investigation of meaning and relationships, as recorded in linguistic, sociocultural, historical and pre-historical data. John Haviland’s focus on the politics of reparation is a fitting end to this volume. It highlights the fact that the knowledge that one may hold really belongs to others. This could place a burden on both parties that may take generations to resolve.

Volume 18 in the series Culture and Language Use is indeed a showcase of ‘the Queensland School’. Should the volume be reprinted, I recommend that its cover should state that it is a Festschrift for Bruce Rigsby. I heartily recommend this book to the specialist and more general reader.

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