Mining, Land Claims and the Negotiation of Indigenous Interests: Research from the Queensland Gulf Country and Pilbara Region of Western Australia

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How might we characterise indigenous responses to large scale mining projects in Australia? Certain aspects of negotiations with the wider society receive considerable public attention – in particular, the matters of protecting culturally significant land areas, environmental risks and monetary compensation [see, e.g., Connell and Howitt 1991; Howitt et al. 1996]. This paper shifts the focus to a consideration of internal deliberations among Aboriginal people; we seek to investigate the social processes whereby mining developments are articulated with indigenous intellectual traditions about the significance of land.

In Queensland’s Gulf Country (Figure 1), Aboriginal participation during the past decade in various “site clearance” surveys and especially negotiations over Century Zinc Mine, have prompted both positive and negative local reactions to resource development projects. While some people have sought actively to lock into place a regime of potential benefits from mining others have opposed it as inconsistent with cultural dimensions of Aboriginal relations to the land. Similarly, in Western Australia’s Pilbara region (Figure 1), a series of new resource projects has been accompanied by large and small scale negotiations between government, developers and Aboriginal people. Indigenous communities who were largely bypassed during the major boom of the 1960s and 1970s now find themselves able to negotiate limited rights through native title and heritage protection legislation.

In both these regions of northern Australia, our research indicates that there has been at least as much conflict as consensus within indigenous communities, as people have encompassed new projects within their own understandings of nature and the landscape. Will creating a huge open cut mine pit at Century interfere with subterranean spiritual forces? How is the permanently burning natural gas flame on the Burrup Peninsula in the Pilbara linked to beliefs about the acquisition of fire from the sea by an important ancestral Dreaming? Such questions arise for Aboriginal people who are asked to “clear” areas of land so that mining activities may be carried out. Furthermore, answers are forged in contexts where there are multiple pressures – from conflicting views within their own communities, as well
as from industry and government parties who are likely to press for a prompt agreement that will enable the projects to proceed.

Sacred Sites and the Social Production of Meaningful Landscapes

In the context of negotiations over resource projects, industry groups and governments commonly seek to solve the “problem” of Aboriginal concerns about “country” by identifying “the sacred sites”, i.e. the areas that can then be avoided in the development process [see e.g. Department of Aboriginal Sites 1994]. Indeed, in both regions that are the subject of this paper, there have been “site clearance” surveys that might be regarded as having achieved some success in this respect. However, it has long been recognised among anthropologists that the significance of land for Aboriginal groups cannot be confined solely to particular bounded areas containing focal nodes of totemic meaning.

In this regard, the “dynamic” nature of Aboriginal religious knowledge has been commented upon. For example, among Western Desert people, Tonkinson
[1991] has described a “characteristic openness” in traditional mythology (p.136), involving the production of “new information” from spiritual revelations; this can include “the finding of new [sacred] objects and the subsequent deduction of new links between sites and creative beings” (p.137). Also from a desert region, Myers [1986: 64-66] recounts a particular illustrative case about how a distinctive topographic feature, not previously known as a significant site, was interpreted among Pintupi people in terms of familiar mythic details about the general country in which the place was located. This, he says, is geography operating as a code for producing meaning about the land; a “deductive process ... for explaining the existence of strange geological formations and shapes – or more generally why there is something at a place at all” (p.66).

Merlan [1997: 8] has recently coined the term “epistemic openness” to designate this Aboriginal preparedness to interpret new meanings in the landscape; her own example from the Katherine area in the Northern Territory concerns the deduction of the significance of a singularly shaped stone found partly dislodged by grader work. Merlan’s discussion is focused especially on settings in which development projects are the subject of negotiations. Possibly the most heavily politicised context in which this issue has been salient in recent years is the controversy over developments at Hindmarsh Island in South Australia. For here there have been allegations of fraud in the production by certain Aboriginal people of particular meanings in the landscape. While discussing the possibilities of such fabrication in this case, Tonkinson [1997: 11] has reminded us again of the “considerable anthropological evidence indicating that the creation or revelation of new knowledge, including new sites, was intrinsic to Aboriginal religious life”.

It is this question of how Aboriginal people discuss country when it is the subject of contesting land use visions that we seek to examine in this paper. Despite the ample evidence that, according to indigenous intellectual traditions, there is a certain quality of “sacredness” associated with the entire landscape, and in fact that it can be difficult to distinguish “sites” from surrounding areas [Maddock 1991], confining the dimensions of land that should not be developed continues to be a major issue of conflict – both between Aboriginal groups and developers and among Aboriginal people themselves. What are the implications of what Merlan terms “epistemic openness” for the process of negotiations over new mining enterprises? Does this notion help us understand how Aboriginal people conceive transformations of the landscape by mining developments?

In the case of the Queensland Gulf Country, there has been a series of situations during the past decade, where Aboriginal groups have found the task of making firm decisions about large-scale developments problematic. While this has been partly because of diverse indigenous views about possible benefits to be obtained from mining projects, it also follows from the nature of Aboriginal worldviews concerning the cultural significance of land. For it would seem that even the most definitive statement by particular knowledgeable senior people, that there are no “sacred sites” in a particular area, is potentially subject to either direct
challenge or what we would term circumspect “worry” at a later date.

Certainly, it has been possible in the Gulf Country to survey various areas and establish from senior people that no major totemic (or “Dreaming”) sites will be affected by some of the proposed exploration activities such as drilling, road making and so on. However, especially if the area to be “cleared” in this way is a substantial size, it is generally not feasible to inspect every aspect of the land involved. Thus, it is entirely possible that a topographic feature will be “discovered” on some future occasion, and be interpreted as significant in one of a number of ways.

A striking example in the Gulf Country setting occurred towards the end of a survey where various sites were inspected and arrangements discussed as to protecting particular locations and allowing others to be destroyed by aspects of a large new mining development. This was an area that had also been flown over previously in a helicopter with senior Waanyi and Garrawa men in order to establish that no major totemic dreaming routes were present. However, while returning by vehicle through an area not visited on any earlier occasion, the survey party passed a particularly distinctive hill with rock outcrops protruding along its spine. People in Trigger’s vehicle immediately discussed this hill with great interest, and the oldest authoritative man present proclaimed that it “must be ijan [dreaming], “he dreaming that one” (i.e. in his view, it surely must constitute an indication of a totemic force in the landscape). His comment is a good example of what Merlan characterises [1997: 9] as an “openness [of] epistemic attitude”; once stated in these terms by such a respected elder person, this is a matter that others would likely go on to discuss in the future, perhaps visiting the hill again if possible, and generally integrating interpretations about it into the regional Aboriginal worldview.

A case from the west Pilbara provides further illustration of this type of process. The Aboriginal people of the region comment that land can be read like a book. Individuals commonly say that their language itself “comes from the ground”. It originated from and is embedded in the landscape. To know country, then, one has to communicate with it, speak to the land and the flora and fauna in the appropriate language. In this context, the ubiquitous rock engravings of the region are likened to handwriting. They are symbols to be read in the same way, people suggest, as the Bible is to be read. Only those who understand the relevant language and have been through the appropriate ritual can interpret the landscape correctly.

In one survey, an Aboriginal field party encountered a stone arrangement which it believed might represent Warlu, the Water Serpent. This was not a previously known “sacred site” but rather a feature discovered in the course of “clearing” an area for further development. The survey party experienced some difficulty for it was made up of younger people who lacked confidence in assessing the site. Members of the field team felt certain that the arrangement was not due to chance and was not a “natural” feature; their view was that the area needed to be
examined further before development was allowed to proceed.

The issue was not so much a question of whether this was a newly recognised place of some significance but whether it was potentially dangerous in any way. Arrangements were made for a senior knowledgeable man from the community to visit the site and examine it for evidence of the presence of Warlu. He subsequently did this alone, insisting that others not approach, in case it was dangerous. After examining the site and talking to the land, he concurred with the survey party that it was indeed a Warlu place, but that this dreaming had departed because there had been so much development nearby; the site was within 100 metres of a major road. At the request of the developer, he marked out what he considered to be the site’s boundaries and the company was asked to ensure that ground disturbance took place outside the area.

This was followed with a visit by a busload of people to show a broader community group how the survey had been performed. The bus stopped near the Warlu site and an outline of what had been discovered was explained to the party by members of the original survey team. During the visit a senior woman reported that she was having a vision in which she could see a serpent coiled in the air above the Warlu site. News of the vision quickly spread in the community when the party returned. It was regarded as further confirmation of the place as a Warlu site, but it also raised the question whether the Warlu had actually left the place as the senior man had earlier indicated. Several people who went on the bus trip complained later that they had experienced disturbed sleep patterns after their visit and attributed this to forces in the land which were warning them about the consequences of damaging the country. There was also community discussion about whether fencing the site, as the developer had proposed, would be sufficient to avoid enraging the Warlu. Finally, it was agreed that the fencing could proceed, provided senior men were present while it was being constructed.

Within the space of a week the Warlu site had become firmly established as a significant place in the Aboriginal community. People travelling along the road would point it out to others and recall the way in which the Warlu had revealed itself to the woman. During the fencing operation that followed, one of the Aboriginal men working on the project reported that he had inadvertently strayed into the zone marked out by the senior man and had been violently pushed to the ground by an invisible force. In an unrelated survey, the community objected to another mining company’s plans to drill and blast on a nearby hill in case the action should enrage the Warlu. Although the senior man had stated that the Warlu had abandoned the site, the evidence of the vision, disturbed sleep patterns and the experience of the fencing contractor were sufficient to raise concerns that the site still possessed considerable totemic power. It was not the sort of place where risks should be taken.

Both the Gulf and Pilbara regions, then, encompass an indigenous cosmology that ultimately does not confine the intellectual framing of the significance of the landscape within a fixed body of knowledge with known finite dimensions.
Certainly, there are specific, often named, sites with particular well known meanings; however, there is also a process whereby newly experienced objects, places and associated phenomena are integrated flexibly into indigenous worldviews, in a fashion consistent with long held traditional religious precepts. The two cases presented concern making meaning out of newly encountered distinctive topographic features. We can also note how the “power” of the inherent spirituality of the bush was apprehended through a vision and difficulties sleeping. These are examples of the ways a wide range of personal experiences are at times understood as prompted by the realm of spiritual forces – experiences as diverse as the witnessing of a surprising behaviour by an animal, an unusual shape of a tree or strange movements of wind or water.

These encounters with nature thus continue to be understood as “saturated” with significant signs and meanings, as Stanner [1979: 13] so elegantly put the matter, despite enormous cultural changes among Gulf Country and Pilbara groups over the past 100 years. Furthermore, Aboriginal interpretations of country are commonly set within rich histories of occupation and use of the land, whereby sentimental attachments to the places people have lived and worked are mixed with nostalgia and respect for the fact that “old people” once occupied the bush before the disruptions of European colonisation. “Their hands touched these things!”, exclaimed one person about her ancestors who used stone tool artefacts found lying near drill holes in the case of one survey in the Gulf Country. Her comment was made as others agreed that the stone tools must not be destroyed.

Given this type of social context, any particular decision about enabling a modification of “country” for a large development, typically remains subject to an ongoing flexible pattern of interpretation implicit within Aboriginal cosmology and history. Indeed, a further Pilbara example illustrates how indigenous conceptions of spiritual potencies inhering in the land have been the basis for local explanations of the very presence of the actual valuable resources sought by developers.

Woodside Petroleum’s natural gas project was established in the early 1980s. The project involves the extraction of gas from the North West Shelf, some 130 kilometres north of the Pilbara coast, and its transportation by a sub-sea pipeline to a processing plant on the Burrup Peninsula. As a safety measure, the onshore facility includes a tall emergency flare tower that houses a permanent gas flame. The flare tower can be seen for many kilometres and has become a landmark in the region. For most of the time the flare is visible as a glow in the western night sky from communities like Cheeditha, near Roebourne. When there is low cloud over the coast, however, light from the flare can assume aurora-like characteristics as it reflects off the surfaces of the clouds. Aboriginal people at Cheeditha and Roebourne say that sometimes parallel shafts of light appear to pierce the sky from the vicinity of the flare, just like “spears in the ground”. This is interpreted by some people as a sign that “something” might be there; that is, something other than a simple safety device.

The Woodside facility is now a familiar part of the landscape of the West
Pilbara and many Aboriginal people have visited the project and understand the general processes by which the gas is extracted and refined. While the technological explanations may be accepted, however, the fundamental question of why there should be such a resource to exploit in the first place is a conundrum. A problem posed by the nature of the project is that, unlike the conventional mining projects with which most people are familiar, the natural gas project does not have any observable mine site or, for that matter, any visible product. The raw minerals or geological composition of the terrain cannot then be inspected for clues about a possible cultural explanation for the substance. The source of the gas is also well out to sea and its processing takes place within a high security complex which is off limits to the public. The closest one gets to a visual manifestation of product is the emergency gas flare. With the same “habit of mind” described by Myers [1986: 67] for the Pintupi, the Aboriginal people of the area see in objects a sign of what might be there, and of what might explain the nature of things. The gas flare is seen as a sign of what might be behind, or what might explain, such a vast source of energy.

For example, we can consider the way one elderly woman related to Robinson that she often “worried” about the natural gas flare which she can see every night from her home. She was particularly puzzled by the occasional phenomenon of “spears” in the sky and this had made her think that there might be powerful forces at work. She did not offer this as a definite conclusion, but tentatively put it that “might be something there, that’s what I think to myself”. She then went on to recall how her father, a mabarn (“clever man” or “doctor”) used to tell her that there was a very dangerous site out at sea where storms were generated. No-one except mabarn could visit it and “drive” (i.e. control) it to bring up rain from the sea. She did not know where the site was, exactly, but from her father’s explanations it appeared to be out in the direction of the natural gas field. This, she thought, might be the place that Woodside had discovered and the signs could be seen in the way the emergency flare behaved.

A widespread view in the community also links the flare to a myth about the origin of fire. As the story is told, a family group possessed a single firestick which was stolen by Wagtail (Jirrijirri) Dreaming. Jirrijirri flew off over the ocean, somewhere north of Karratha, pursued by Karlamarna (Sparrow Hawk). As Jirrijirri was about to plunge into the sea with the firestick, it was plucked out of his hands by Karlamarna, who returned it to the shore where it was reclaimed by humans. Another named ancestral being then created songs about the event and engraved scenes from it into rock surfaces. Aboriginal people liken Woodside’s emergency flare tower to the firestick (thama) and the flame appears as a constant reminder of the connection between the resource development project and indigenous understandings of the land (Photo 1).

Although the original myth said nothing about fields of gas or energy people use it as a basis for explaining Woodside’s find. The gas, they argue, could not have found its way to the bottom of the ocean by chance. The Jirrijirri story demonstrates, in their view, that Aboriginal culture had knowledge of the existence
of the gas fields long before non-Aboriginal technology discovered them. Aboriginal culture had contained the knowledge that a rich source of energy was in the sea, else why would Jirrijirri have flown out there with a firestick? The company’s discovery is thus explained in terms of its technological ability rather than its knowledge of nature or the physical world of landscape and environment.

During recent discussions about whether compensation should be sought from the company, people argued that the source of gas is presaged in the Aboriginal belief system and is evidenced in narrative, song and engraving sites over a wide area. The company had only used its wealth and specialist equipment to extract the gas, whereas Aboriginal culture had long known of its existence but lacked the technology to harvest it.
As has been evident during negotiations over mining in the Gulf Country of Queensland [Blowes and Trigger 1998; Trigger 1998], the indigenous view in the west Pilbara has thus been that natural resources are in an important sense owned by Aboriginal people; and it is expected that extraction of a resource will appropriately occur on the basis of adequate compensation. To this extent, Indigenous conceptions of nature and the land have a direct political consequence for relationships with the broader society. However, negotiating over new development projects also presents substantial challenges for the management of social relations within Aboriginal communities. If designating the significance of landscapes is best characterised as a negotiated social process among Aboriginal people, it also is clearly subject to the ebb and flow of local politics. What are the internal political factors affecting indigenous constructions of meaningful landscapes in the 1990s?

LAND, RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT AND THE POLITICS OF MEANING

The case material presented in this paper demonstrates the flexibility implicit within indigenous decision making. The significance of land is negotiated among Aboriginal people through interpretations of oral traditions and thereby through reference to extant knowledge of totemic geography. However, what is also clear is that there is a vibrant pattern of internal Indigenous politics that determines such outcomes. Indeed, our data suggest that politicking and competition among indigenous groups commonly consumes more negotiating energies than does the process of dealing with industry and government parties. As Merlan [1997: 9-10] puts it, the openness of epistemic attitude that she describes, “is in contact with the basic materials of local politics”.

Recent literature has clarified the nature of Aboriginal politics that might be described as increasingly swirling around the operation of formally constituted indigenous corporations. Sullivan [1997: 129] mentions that there is a lack of any effective internal political authority over disputing Aboriginal groups; furthermore, he depicts the constitution of indigenous land-holding groups as contextual rather than “fixed in time and space”, with memberships that vary “for certain purposes at certain times” (p.131). To the extent that this is so, can negotiations about mining (or other development projects involving land use) be based on dealing with indigenous representatives or spokespersons who remain stable in such positions over time?

In an important paper, Martin [1995] also characterises contemporary Aboriginal social organisation as resting on “fluidity, negotiability and indeterminacy”, with a “stress on personal distinctiveness at virtually all levels of social practice” and a “pervasive resistance to the imposition of authority” within the Aboriginal domain (p.5). Thus, individuals who may hold prominent positions in indigenous organisations, are generally refused any recognised authority to represent the interests of constituents or members or to control the resources of the
organisation (p.8). Martin and Finlayson [1996] have developed this argument, describing the Aboriginal domain as typically highly factionalised, characterised by cross-cutting allegiances and thus entailing a strong tendency towards group fission and disaggregation rather than aggregation and corporateness [see also Sutton 1995]. Individual and family interests constantly intrude, then, on attempts among Aboriginal people to achieve community wide unity in negotiations with the wider society. Much energy goes typically into negotiating the internal social and political relationships that are of paramount concern in Aboriginal societies [Martin and Finlayson 1996: 6].

These points hold considerable relevance for our discussion of indigenous responses to mining projects. In a social milieu where there is likely to be at least as much “atomism” as “collectivism” [Sutton 1995] how is it to be decided whether a particular area of land can be developed? Do designated individuals have sufficient authority to pronounce on the question of allowing country to be mined?

In the Queensland Gulf Region, this has been a vexed problem during the 1990s for the multiple groups and residential communities facing decisions about the large new Century Zinc Mine. The pattern of decision making in relation to one particular area provides an illustrative example. In a 1994 study, a small cave site was found by archaeologists on a hill side just inside the perimeter of the proposed open cut pit to be constructed as part of the Century project. The location of this site was previously unknown to Waanyi people; however, in April 1995 it was inspected with considerable interest by a party of some 26 individuals, with the outcome being that all present agreed it should be preserved. Stone artefacts were noted, as was charcoal on the surface of the cave floor. Similarly, on a hill nearby, a quite extensive stone quarry site was examined and the same decision was taken with respect to this site. The area was regarded as important as it indicated the historical occupation of the country by earlier generations of Aboriginal people. Comments included: “that’s part of our culture”; “from our ancestors and all that, you know, from Dreamtime... , best to reckon it stay here”; “our people been here, we don’t know [how long], for many, many years, and we’d like to see this ... [hill] stay where it is, don’t want it removed”.

However, over ensuing months, major divisions developed among Waanyi people as to whether it was best to sign a negotiated agreement that would enable the mining project to proceed [Trigger 1997]. Disagreements derived from a number of dimensions of Aboriginal life, including diverse views about benefits offered and the chances of negotiating a better deal through applying pressure publicly to the company and the government; local level disputes unrelated to the mine also led to considerable argument between various senior persons as to just who held relevant traditional knowledge concerning the area. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people seemingly sought to exploit a tendency in indigenous social life whereby senior people joust forcefully among one another for reputations [Trigger 1992: 111-118]. Thus there developed a dispute, with considerable feeling and sentiment expressed from time to time, as to who among senior men and
women could comment authoritatively on the matter of whether the stone artefact scatters and the cave site were too important culturally to be destroyed in return for what was being offered as compensation.

By late 1996, this split had developed quite bitterly among relevant senior Waanyi and Garrawa persons. One group of elder people, together with their younger supporters, pronounced that the site merely contained artefacts that could be found all over Waanyi country and that there was "nothing there" in terms of spiritual significance. The other group (similarly diverse in terms of both genders and different age categories) remained vitally concerned that the area should remain "as nature made him" and as it was when the "old people walked around" (i.e. when Aboriginal people still occupied the bush). Each side became locked into alliances with particular local and regional Aboriginal organisations and corporations.

Alliances were also formed with the non-Aboriginal parties. Both company and government personnel sought to support the senior Indigenous people who appeared to be agreeing that the sites could be destroyed as part of the mine development. In December 1996, Queensland Government negotiators delivered a letter to those negotiating on behalf of native title groups; the lead Queensland negotiator reported on a meeting he had held with a widely respected senior man known throughout the region to hold expert status with respect to Indigenous law. The Queensland personnel stated they now had the agreement of this individual elder person that the cave site and artefact scatters could be destroyed; it was the Queensland negotiator's view that the senior law man believed the mine would benefit future generations of Aboriginal people through providing employment and associated opportunities.

The reporting of this alleged view of the law man occurred in a large negotiating meeting near the end of the right-to-negotiate period for Century Mine. It immediately prompted several other Waanyi men to complain forcefully that it was not solely the right of this one man to make such a decision. While his unsurpassed knowledge of "law" was never challenged, his being positioned to speak for others on this particular matter was also never accepted. Yes, people acknowledged this man's word that no key dreaming sites were to be affected by the mine pit; however, others had different views about what was culturally valuable (in this case, a cave site and stone artefacts). Furthermore, there were some who repeatedly voiced their speculative concerns about whether digging down deep into the earth might disturb unknown spiritual forces, i.e. potencies with no specific ("sacred site") surface level topographic manifestations but with a general presence underground: "They gonna wake up that Rainbow [Snake], I'm sure", as one man put it.

Thus, in this highly contentious case, there was a complex mix of internal indigenous politics and strategies pursued by the industry and government parties, which influenced the way meanings in the landscape were negotiated among Aboriginal people. The tendency towards an open epistemology was harnessed to various causes and alliances. No clear decision about whether the cave site and
artefact scatters should be preserved or destroyed was forthcoming by the end of the negotiation period. For there emerged no process of indigenous decision making that could be accepted as authoritative across all groups and individuals.

In the case of a similar dispute in the Pilbara, we can describe what appears to be a more consensual outcome. Here a community was faced during the early 1990s with a respected senior man’s assertion that a particular hill was a significant Dreaming site. A mining company had arranged an inspection of its proposed area of operation, including a prominent hill which was to be the source of its ore. The hill itself had been mined over many years by several other mining companies which led the proponent to anticipate that there would be no objection to its continuing to develop the area. Not only had the hill been substantially mined, but there had been two separate site surveys in the past which had reported that it did not have any cultural significance. The company had only arranged a further ground inspection because of an archaeological survey which had identified a previously unrecorded site on the plain below the hill. It wanted to establish whether the Aboriginal community would object to this archaeological site being disturbed and included an inspection of the hill to familiarise the community with its plans.

After driving to the summit of the hill, a senior man in the party declared that this high ground was the metamorphosed body of an important Dreaming figure. He named it and pointed to other features in the surrounding landscape which he said were associated with the being and its movements. On the basis of this assertion, a further site survey was then initiated to establish whether there was community support for this particular man’s assertions and to discover why the earlier surveys had not reported similarly on the hill’s significance.

During the further survey, the senior man maintained his position that the hill was culturally significant. He said that he had been told about the area by two brothers, now deceased, who were regarded by the community as the traditional owners of the area. The daughter of one of the brothers lent some support to his views by saying that she had heard that such a hill was located in the general area, but no-one else claimed to have independent knowledge of such a site or could corroborate the senior man’s explanation.

This view propounded by such an influential individual created political and economic difficulties for the community. Negotiations had already begun with the mining company concerned which had indicated a willingness to pay compensation generally for its use of the land and to employ community members on the project. If the orebody could not be mined, however, there would be no project and therefore no compensation or jobs. The seniority of the man making the assertions of significance meant, however, that there was a potential for political repercussions if people opposed his point of view or contradicted his statements. There were also implications for those who had participated in the earlier surveys and indicated that the hill was not significant. It emerged that the senior man had not been consulted during those earlier surveys.
Although no-one in the community came forward to verify directly what the senior man had said, it was also the case that nobody was prepared to contradict him publicly. Those who participated in the earlier surveys largely withdrew from direct participation in the resolution of the problem. They neither accompanied the new survey nor took part in subsequent meetings about it. In private one of the leading members of the previous surveys stated that he would accept what the senior man said about the future of the mine and would not openly oppose him.

After a period of some weeks, while internal discussions took place about the advantages and disadvantages of the project, the senior man resolved the dilemma by declaring that, in his opinion, the hill had been so badly damaged by previous mining that any objection to further development would be pointless. While by no means changing his view that the hill was significant spiritually, he announced that he would not object to mining proceeding at the site, and the broader community once again was able to turn its attention to negotiating with the company for “compensation”.

CONCLUSION: THE POLITICS OF CULTURE AND THE ARTICULATION OF INDIGENOUS INTERESTS IN MINING NEGOTIATIONS

In this paper, we have sought to depict two key features of Australian Aboriginal responses to large scale mining projects. Both concern deliberations occurring among and within Aboriginal groups in the broader context of intense negotiations with industry and government.

Firstly, we have discussed how the significance of land itself must be resolved through processes of interpretation and often argumentation among relevant Aboriginal people. This is not a matter of simply consulting a fixed body of knowledge about particular “sacred sites”, but rather involves prominent individuals interpreting signs in the landscape according to a broad set of beliefs about the general spiritual forces underlying the world of immediately observable topographic and other phenomena. Furthermore, the signs taken into account can include the very existence of discovered valuable resources that are sought by the institutions of the wider Australian society.

This is a process of “reading” the landscape according to what we might term a set of rules (or what Myers [1986: 66] calls a “code”) that derive from bodies of customary “law” and traditions. While there are important elements of personal and collective interpretation at the core of such “readings” of the country, and thus ways in which the process is indeed appropriately regarded as “epistemically open” [Merlan 1997], it is also important to be clear about the constraints upon this intellectual practice. Certainly, it would be inaccurate to suppose that the cases we present in this paper simply involve “inventiveness” or “fabrication” on the part of ambitious individuals. Our data suggest that features of the landscape, including rock art, engravings, old camp sites and a wide range of environmental phenomena, will be typically understood according to intellectual principles embedded deeply in
regional cultural traditions. We might best conceive these principles as constituting a fundamental level of underlying regional indigenous customary “laws” [Sutton 1996], i.e. assumptions and precepts which arguably remain robust through much cultural change, and which continue to play a critical role in the way Aboriginal communities work out rights and interests in land at the local level. Decisions about the appropriateness or otherwise of large-scale mining developments are, to a considerable extent, likely to be deliberated upon among Aboriginal people in terms of interpretations about country that are driven by such broad customary knowledge.

The further issue in this paper is the political nature of the interpretive process among the Aboriginal communities with whom we have worked. This is to demonstrate that there is a vibrant indigenous body politic in operation which must be understood if we are to depict accurately the way in which Aboriginal people respond to large scale new mining enterprises. While regional customary “law” provides the context in which indigenous views about mining are negotiated in the Gulf Country and the west Pilbara, patterns of local indigenous politics can involve considerable conflict about appropriate uses of the land. The brief case materials given here indicate that a competitive politics of reputation, especially among senior individuals, will commonly operate in a relationship of some tension with the more collectivist imperative to draw on shared customary knowledge in establishing the meaning of land and the appropriateness of its “development”.

Finally, such competition over interpretations of cultural knowledge is commonly situated amidst other patterns of social relations whereby different Indigenous corporations, families and individuals must vie for access to financial resources from a host of government and other sources. There is typically a mix of cultural politics and material aspirations that constitutes the setting in which Indigenous interests are articulated in the context of new resource development projects. In our view, understanding indigenous responses to such projects, thus requires a sophisticated recognition of the resilience of cultural beliefs about land, while also facing squarely the implications of local politics driven by the material realities in people’s lives.

NOTES

1) The editors gratefully acknowledge the publisher Crawford House and Dr. Trigger for agreeing to our request to reprint this article as part of the conference proceedings where it was originally presented. The original publication data is 2001 [Trigger and Robinson 2001].
2) References to the West Pilbara region in this paper draw predominantly from the Aboriginal communities of Roebourne, Cheeditha, Wickham and Karratha. These communities consist in the main of Yindjibarndi and Ngarluma peoples but also contain significant groupings of Kariyarra, Kurrama, Martuthunira and Banyjima [Wordick 1982; Edmunds 1989].
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Trigger, D. and M. Robinson


Wordick, F. J. F.