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Abstract

Interpretation of Aboriginal heritage usually involves the presentation of unchanging sites. The Gummingurru stone arrangement on the Darling Downs, southern Queensland, cannot be exhibited in this way. Originally a men's initiation site, today Gummingurru has meaning as a place that is actively 'resurrected' and renewed by traditional custodians. Their management includes the regular repair of ancient arrangements and creation of new motifs. Ongoing use of the site and continual allocation of new meaning to the motifs are valorised. This challenges traditional forms of interpretation. In this paper we investigate use of the internet to interpret living, constantly changing, heritage.

Keywords

Aboriginal Australians, living heritage, changing meaning, internet interpretation.

Introduction

Ham (1992), Tilden (1977) and others have all pointed out that interpretation is more than the provision of information, although information provides the basis for interpretation. But how will interpretation cope with constantly changing information?

Most interpretation produces an understanding of stationary places and objects, and of fixed, inert information. Although the specific details of the information communicated may vary each time it is presented, the site, place or object itself remains the same and in this sense the interpretation itself tends to be static. Signs and brochures fix interpretation in a particular place or time, and although they may be updated occasionally, in the main they remain invariable for several years. Even heritage guides generally use standard interpretive text in presenting a place to visitors, and consequently once that text is written

there is little opportunity for the generation of new interpretive materials on a regular basis. In fact, interpretive materials themselves may contribute to shaping static interpretations!

Ham argues that we should be developing an alternative framework for interpretation:

‘... interpretation aims to create in visitors meaning, so that they can put a place into personal perspective and identify with it in a way that is more profound and enduring than random fact-learning can alone produce. Interpretation is meaning making’ (Ham 2002:1).

In setting the challenge for interpretation to be ‘meaning making’, Ham (2002, 2003) discusses the role of the interpreter in creating a sense of meaning in the mind of the viewer of a site or object, of creating an opportunity for the viewer to gain an empathy for the thing being interpreted, rather than just learning about it. Ham argues that members of the public are often ‘numen-seeking’ – searching beyond learning for experiences of ‘intense engagement (or focus), a loss of the sense of time passing, and a transcendence of self’ (Ham 2002:15).

In this paper, we provide the obverse challenge – how can the interpreter capture the shifting meaning at a place that is ever-changing? How can interpretation provide a constantly evolving understanding of a living heritage place whose meaning transforms almost literally on a daily basis?

Gummingurru Aboriginal stone arrangement

The Gummingurru Aboriginal stone arrangement site lies just west of Highfields, between the towns of Toowoomba and Meringandan on the Darling Downs, in inland southern Queensland, Australia (Figure 1).

It covers almost 5ha and is comprised of over a dozen motifs made from the arrangement of local rocks which are formed from basalt caprock that outcrops both on the surface and in the shallow soils which cover parts of the site. It is one of the largest intact stone arrangement sites in Queensland, and is the most easterly stone Bora site recorded in Queensland.

Aboriginal stone arrangements occur throughout Australia, particularly in arid inland areas, and are of ritual importance to Aboriginal peoples. They are part of the dynamic context that formed Aboriginal people’s lives in the late Holocene and contact time, where constant renegotiation of social alliances required an increasing reliance on ceremonial places with ritual importance. Despite the significance of ceremonial stone arrangements to Aboriginal people, there has been little research undertaken into the ritual,

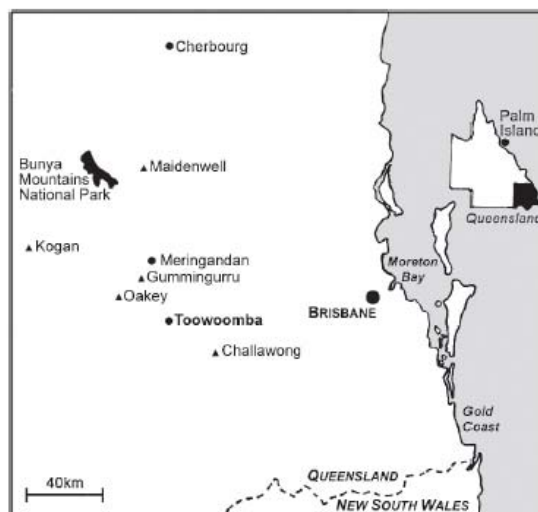


Figure 1: Location of the Gummingurru stone arrangement site. Other nearby ceremonial places (Challawong, Kogan, Maidenwell and Oakey) are also marked.

and other importance of such sites. Although such sites have been reported in archaeological literature over many decades, these recordings have tended to be descriptive, and the arrangements have been portrayed as 'static' – records of past ceremonial activities that, once made, remain as unchanging symbols of particular meaning (McIntyre-Tamwoy and Harrison 2004).

The Gummingurru site is in the country of the Jarowair Aboriginal people, who are one of the many Aboriginal groups associated with the Bunya Mountains and the (usually) triennial feasts and ceremonies held there in pre-European times. The Gummingurru site is one of a series of ceremonial places (see Figure 1) where young men were initiated into manhood before continuing on to participate in 'men's business', held as part of the Bunya nut festivities (Ross 2008). The site has probably not been used for initiation since about 1890 (Thompson 2004).

For most of the 20th century the land on which the Gummingurru site is situated has been grazed. Although grazing has certainly had an adverse effect on the stone arrangements, surprisingly, much of the site has remained relatively intact, although many of the stones in the individual arrangements have been moved out of alignment.

In 2003, the Gummingurru site was bought by the Indigenous Land Corporation, a national organisation funded by the Commonwealth government under the provisions of the *Native Title Act 1993* to buy land for Aboriginal peoples whose connection to traditional lands has been extinguished by subsequent land acquisition. Purchase followed the Queensland government's recognition, in 2000, of the Gummingurru Trust's (now Gummingurru Aboriginal Corporation) custodianship of the site and land. It was at the time of land purchase in 2003 that traditional custodians occupied the site (renting the homestead constructed on the site in the 1980s) and became actively involved in the management and interpretation of the site, commissioning a Management Plan, gaining funding to construct a Visitors' Centre, and commencing guided tours of the site.

In 2002 Paddy Jerome, a traditional Jarowair custodian of the site, had described Gummingurru as follows:

This ground is part of a whole area around the Bunya Mountains that is deeply spiritual. It is one of the places that point to the mountains and you can see the mountains from there. We are resurrecting this (Jerome 2002:4).

This 'resurrecting' of Gummingurru has been an ongoing process since the return of Jarowair people to the land in 2003.

The 'resurrecting' of Gummingurru has involved two types of management endeavour. The first of these has been the 'rediscovering' of motifs buried in the soil which covers the eastern and southern parts of the site, and the repair of ancient arrangements. Although 'traditional' preparation of the site prior to its ceremonial use almost certainly involved maintaining the various stone arrangements and even creating new motifs, the fact that the current actions by the traditional custodians have the potential to 'change' the surviving ancient stone arrangements has created some tensions between bureaucracies and the traditional custodians (Ross 2010), and caused problems for the site's interpretation.

The need for interpretation relates to the second 'resurrection' activity at the Gummingurru site: its redevelopment as a place of learning. Bora grounds were regularly used as places where young people were educated about their culture, and their rights and responsibilities as adults (Bowdler 2005; Ross 2008). As a consequence, modern work on the site that once again provides an opportunity for cultural learning is entirely

in keeping with the ceremonial use of the place. The difference is that today the educational opportunities are not restricted to young men, as would have been the 'traditional' practice for an initiation site, but instead are available to all Australians – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, young and old, male and female.

Both of these resurrection activities cause problems for the recording and documentation of the site, and for its interpretation. 'Digging up' buried stones and (vertically) relocating them to reveal concealed motifs, repairing existing motifs by shifting rocks, and allowing children to handle and even modify archaeological artefacts associated with the site mean that this site changes on an almost daily basis.

In the past, regular maintenance of the site would have also caused regular change, but today archaeologists and land managers tend to view the past as constant and unchanging. They find it difficult to acknowledge the appropriateness of modern Aboriginal actions that revive living heritage aspects of a place, but which jeopardise the authenticity of the original character of the archaeological record (Byrne 2005, Ellis 1994, Zimmerman 2006).

One of the key components of the concept of a 'living heritage' is that heritage constantly evolves. People's connection to place will vary with circumstances. Bradley (2008) makes this point exquisitely in his analysis of 'When a stone tool is a dingo':

In some circumstances, dingoes are simply dingoes, stone tools are just stone tools; but at other times they are relatives, and the action of singing the country and the stone tools' immediacy and presence in place relates them to the manifestations of ancestral beings associated with country (Bradley 2008:635).

So how can a site that constantly changes – almost on a daily basis – be interpreted to the school groups and other visitors wishing to take advantage of its educational potential? How can we provide the kind of interpretive information that schools and visitors will need, to meet the requirements of the curriculum, if site information is constantly changing? How can we make meaning if evolving meaning is part of the sense of the place?

This is where the internet comes to the fore. This is a medium that can be constantly updated to include new data, new learning activities, and new site boundaries. With the constant renewing of information, meaning can also be updated. The other advantage of the internet is that it does not codify knowledge. Knowledge is not published in a form that can never again be changed.

John Bradley found the internet to be a perfect medium for documenting Yanyuwa knowledge. The Yanyuwa website is regularly changed as the Yanyuwa community's focus changes. We decided this was the way to document Gummingurru.

The Gummingurru website

The Gummingurru website was designed by Hank Szeto and Amy Mack using material generated by the Gummingurru Recording Project and was launched in 2009. The aim of the website is to provide information about the site, especially to schools who may like to visit. Pre- and post visit activities are provided, along with contextualising information about the site, and information about how the activities relate to the curriculum. The features of the website include:

- Background information on the history of the site;
- Links to historical documents about the site and its cultural landscape;

- Constantly updated recordings of the site, including the new motifs being generated by the activities of the Jarowair people;
- Archaeological information about the site and other nearby places of related significance;
- Interpretive activities for schools;
- New information about the new and old elements of the site;
- Information about special, temporary programmes and activities at the site;
- Photographs, maps, and research papers.

All this information and the associated interpretive materials can be updated daily, if necessary, and in practice the updates occur every month or so.

The website design centres on Aboriginal ownership of the site and its interpretations (Figure 2). The voices of traditional custodians are featured throughout. The use of numerous photographs helps contextualise the landscape to those who may not have an opportunity to visit the site and therefore extends the mission of the Gummingurru Aboriginal Corporation to use the site to educate the wider public about issues surrounding reconciliation etc.

Conclusion

The Gummingurru stone arrangement is a site that is constantly changing in terms of its physical and knowledge boundaries. Interpreting the site on the internet allows for these regular changes to be incorporated into its description and its knowledge base. The website is

designed for use by schools and others interested in the history of the site, and visiting the place to learn about Aboriginal culture. It is an excellent template for other Aboriginal communities wishing to take advantage of this easily up-dated medium to promote their own cultural heritage. Putting heritage online overcomes problems of codifying heritage and cementing the boundaries of living heritage places.

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Figure 2: Gummingurru website: www.gummingurru.com.au

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