COUNTER-MAPPING:
New South Wales & Southeast Asia

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Taking Back the Map

In the course of the last fifteen years there has been a heightened awareness of the power of maps (e.g., Harley 2001, Monmonier 1991, Wood 1992). Recent critical cartography has addressed itself to the question of how reality is distorted by the two-dimension nature of maps. There has been increasing attention to which interests in society are spoken for by maps, in asking who gets left off maps and way they are left off. This emergent critical tradition in geography has been paralleled by a growing assertiveness on the part of many minority and marginalised groups in today's world. These groups appear to realise that disempowerment has a great deal to do with visibility and that their own relative invisibility relates quite directly to the kind of hypervisibility achieved by those with power. We only have to look at the history of colonialism to observe how the technology of mapping has been employed for purposes of domination and territorial dispossession. What is perhaps novel today, though, is that mapping technology has become increasingly available to the dispossessed and that they are actively availing themselves of it.

Some of this activity involves a straightforward skill transfer whereby Indigenous people adopt mainstream cartographic templates for mapping their own interests (e.g., using GPS to map the location of medicinal plants in a given landscape). In other cases the emphasis has been on finding original ways to represent Indigenous worldviews. The surge in alternative mapping activity in recent decades, under headings that include counter-mapping (see below), AltGIS, GIS2 and public participation GIS (e.g., Rambaldi & Callosa-Tarr 2002; Craig, Harris & Weiner 2002) is not, however,

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unproblematic. Marginalised peoples are enjoying greater success in getting themselves and their interests onto maps but at the cost of an increasing volume of Indigenous knowledge becoming public domain. Another side effect is that maps are becoming increasingly embedded as privileged forms of spatial knowledge (Harris and Harrower 2006: 7) as distinct, for example, from story-telling. A mud-map or sand-map is erased by nature soon after being inscribed; it 'belongs' to the map-maker in the sense that its materiality often lasts only for the duration of a performance. It belongs, in a sense, to the story which in turn belongs to the teller. A digital or printed map on the other hand can be reproduced at will and consumed without reference to the original knowledge-holder.

Distant nature

I turn now to consider the particular case of counter-mapping in relation to nature conservation. 'How do people become aware that they are strangers in their own lands? Sometimes they are forcibly removed. Sometimes they are just reclassified'. These words by the Chinese-American anthropologist, Anna Tsing (1993:154) were made with reference to the groups of shifting agriculturalists who occupy many of Southeast Asia's tropical forests. On colonial era maps these forests were typically classified as 'wasteland' and as such were appropriated by the state as unoccupied natural resource zones (Roseman 2003; Sowerwine 2004; Tsing 2003). Heather Goodall (2006: 87) notes that, in a similar way, on the official maps used to plan the British nuclear tests in central South Australia in the 1950s, the words 'vacant land' were inscribed across the country of the Aboriginal people living there.

The condition of being left 'off the map' is one in which, from an official-cartographic point of view, people are left floating in non-cartographic space with little or no recognition of their belonging to or in their own country. In many cases, the post-colonial governments of Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam, rather than rejecting the mapping projects of the colonial powers, further elaborated them. The country of minority groups was often classified by colonial regimes as primary forest, a move which simplified the process of treating the forest as a state resource that could be allocated as logging concessions and mining leases to national and international companies without reference to the people who inhabited it. The map-making process

clearly needs to be seen as a selective, value-loaded one that renders some things invisible in the very act of giving legibility to other things.

It is perhaps understandable that post-colonial governments would adopt colonialism's mapping and land classification practices as they consolidated the 'geo-body' (Thongchai 1994) of the new national states. It is surprising, though, to find colonialism's practices so often adopted uncritically by nature conservationists. Originating in the nineteenth century Western world as a reaction to the devastating impact on the environment of industrialism and extractive capitalism, nature conservation, it has been noted, tended to 'ghetto-ise nature in enclaves of bio-authenticity' (Campbell 2005:283). This is to say that, turning away in horror from industrialism's blighted landscape, nascent conservationism sought its opposite in an idealised pure nature, a nature perceived to be uninscribed by culture and situated in enclaves remote from the urban setting.

The British anthropologist, Ben Campbell (2005:285) refers to this as the '*distant-nature* conservationist mindset'. As a mindset still deeply embedded in conservationism, it holds to the idea that 'natural landscapes' can be characterised as independent of human culture. Campbell (2005:301) asserts that uncritical conservationism can be seen as 'belong[ing] to a colonial genealogy of perceiving foreign lands as *terra nullius*'. In other words, land belonging to no-one. Whereas for colonialism, the concept of *terra nullius* set the scene for land acqustion and various kinds of economic exploitation, for uncritical nature conservationism it sets the scene for imposing constraints on local populations who are characterised as impinging on nature with their unsustainable lifestyles.

It is only comparatively recently that anthropologists living with and studying forest peoples in places like Borneo (Peluso 1992, 2003; Tsing 1993) and peninsula Malaysia (Roseman 2003) have begun to produce maps that show the real subtlety and complexity of the cultural landscapes these people construct and inhabit in areas that previously were mapped as 'wasteland'. These 'counter-maps'—so called because they challenge colonial and neo-colonial mapping—show forests as storied historical sites where individual trees are often known by their own names, and where hills and gullies

are intricately inscribed with the territories of spirits and deities. For such people, 'nature' is never distant: it is immediate, unreified and eminently cultural.

Counter-mapping and Cultural Heritage

Much of the pressure for the creation of national parks in the developing world is coming from international nature conservation NGOs who often have a fairly simplistic idea of the way that cultural landscapes are constituted. In this context the type of 'counter-mapping' (Peluso 1995) mentioned above becomes attractive as a means for articulating the way local people see nature and culture as an integrated and complex whole. The mapping of vegetation and biodiversity is likely to happen early in the process of the creation of national parks, very often without any comparable effort to map the spiritual, social and economic significance of the same landscape to local people living in or around the boundaries of a park. The danger is that the cultural dimension of the landscape may be eclipsed by GIS data layers that document natural values.

There is a tendency in protected area management to identify natural values and cultural values as separate entities. The former may consist, for instance, of species and habitats and the latter of archaeological sites and ritual places. Typically these would be mapped as separate data layers (Byrne in press), a procedural approach which while innocent in itself nevertheless sets the layers up to be managed separately in a park management context. Needless to say, such split-stream management would be at odds with the holistic conceptualisation that local people have of their landscape.

In cultural heritage practice, however, the established approach is to map cultural sites as dot point data and to emphasise their historical associations over their contemporary human associations. Archaeologists have been inclined to regard the archaeological record for any one period of the past as part of a landscape that belongs *in* that period and *to* that period. The tendency, in other words, is to think of it as belonging to the society that produced it in the past. This ignores plentiful evidence that people in the present narrate these sites into their lives through myth or song, that they weave them into their own accounts of who they are, and that they apprehend them as being animated with the presence of spirits or deities. So while the archaeologist is often

interested simply in origins, local peoples tend to absorb 'archaeological' traces into the lived reality of contemporary lives which are lived in a past-present-future continuum.

'Distant-nature' might thus be said to have a counterpart in a discourse of 'distant-traces'. If the former denotes a pure nature which is always 'out there' (Campbell 2005:289) rather than meshed into the contemporary lived environment, then the latter denotes an archaeological record which is always 'back there' in time rather than integrated by contemporary culture.

Counter-mapping in NSW

I will turn now to the situation in New South Wales where in many ways the nature-culture standoff is identical to that already discussed. The conclusion I make from the first part of my paper can be summed up with the observation that the problem we have with nature conservation—call it a movement, discourse, of field of practice—is that it continually seeks to *contain* the cultural within the natural. In the context of the management of national parks or other protected areas, this means that whatever heritage places are recorded, they tend to be seen as being contained within a landscape that is *a priori* natural.

We refer to this as a 'site-based' or 'dot-point' approach. It is an approach that appeals to park managers, whose educational backgrounds tend overwhelmingly to be in the biological sciences, because it allows them to attend to the conservation needs of these sites and then get on with the job of managing an environment that is perceived as 'natural' (Brown in press). Cultural heritage is thus isolated, for management purposes, from the environment as a whole.

One of the most obvious ways of reconnecting heritage sites to the larger environmental context is by mapping the way people in the past moved around in the terrain surrounding the sites. Another way of expressing this is to say that the entities we refer to as heritage sites are points on trajectories of movement – call them pathways, routes, itineraries, what you will. The sites represent moments in lives lived across landscapes rather than lives lived inside sites. In a DECC project carried out with Aboriginal people on the mid-north coast of New South Wales pathways were mapped connected mid-20th

century Aboriginal settlement enclaves with fishing places, camping and picnic sites, and other frequently visited locations (Byrne & Nugent 2004). In another DECC project the cattle droving trails used by mid-20th century Aboriginal stock workers on a former NSW pastoral station were mapped together with the camps and stock yards situated at various points along the trails (Harrison 2004). A key objective in all of this research was to bring to the broader public's attention the fact that, even in those parts of Australia that had been colonised by white settlers earliest and in greatest density, Aboriginal people had continued to maintain very extensive patterns of movement. In part this was possible by taking advantage of gaps and openings in the white cadastral property grid and by transgressing cadastral boundaries (Byrne 2003).

It is not just the larger proportion of the archaeological landscape that is now locked up inside the cadastral grid of private property, it is also the greater proportion of past and present Aborigianal fishing places and other wild resource locales. The mapping of such places also has a 'counter' aspect to it in that it potentially unsettles the colonial mapping of resources which, like colonial mapping in Southeast Asia, classified the landscape in terms of its usefulness in the framework of the colonial, not the Indigenous economy (Byrne and Nugent 2004:15-16). It would seem that archaeological mapping in places like Australia, unless it documents the association of contemporary Aboriginal people with archaeological landscapes, is simply a continuation of the colonial project of taking possession of new lands. This is a dimension of mapping that all archaeologists should reflect on prior to developing survey strategies.

Conclusion

The relevance of counter-mapping to the Indigenous people of Southeast Asia and Australia derives from their shared need to be able to depict the topographic dimensions of their culture in terms that are intelligible to those empowered others with whom they must negotiate their continued existence. These Indigenous minorities have been living in the shadow of dominant cultures and polities (colonial and post-colonial) for many generations and their survival has depended heavily upon their accumulated knowledge of these dominant cultures and polities. The Aboriginal people of coastal NSW have needed, for instance, to find space for themselves in the interstices of the white colonial cadastre and have thus acquired a knowledge of white cadastral boundaries, categories

of Crown reservation, and the personalities and attitudes of white landholders over extensive tracts of terrain – a knowledge that is superior to that of many white citizens.

If Indigenous minorities have had to learn the spatial 'language' of those who dominate, they have also needed to be aware of and sensitive to the ways in which their own cultures are read by dominant cultures and polities. While colonial society in NSW viewed the spirituality of the 'traditional' Aboriginal Dreaming as legitimate and authentic it has tended to ridicule contemporary Aboriginal belief in the supernatural. The denigration of contemporary Aboriginal spirituality occurred not just at the hands of Christian missionaries, school teachers and government officials in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In more recent times, many white anthropologists and heritage practitioners have tended to view contemporary Aboriginal ascriptions of 'sacredness' to places in the landscape with suspicion unless they are authenticated in the early ethnography. One Aboriginal response to this is a form of self-censorship in which contemporary spirituality is edited out of the version of their culture which is made available to certain white researchers. This is particularly noticeable in the heritage field where Aboriginal people appear to go along with, and even participate in, heritage mapping exercises in which archaeological sites (mostly pre-contact) are recorded in their thousands but sites of contemporary spiritual significance rarely make an appearance despite them being a common topic in local Aboriginal discourse. I draw attention to this here, in my conclusion, because it serves as a caution against a too simplistic idea of counter-mapping purely as a transaction involving two sides: the locally disenfranchised and the external power. Things are never that simple.

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