

Landscape and Immutability in an Aboriginal Australian culture

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Aboriginal Australian societies are notable in the world of hunter-gatherers for the seemingly contradictory co-presence of high mobility and very strong attachment to ‘home’ sites and estates, which are fundamental to both individual and group identities. The grounding of identity in both ‘dreamings’ and ‘country’ adds force to this attachment because the ancestral creative beings are closely associated with specific sites and tracts of territory. As Munn (1970) has ably demonstrated, ‘country’ (the object world) not only anchors the human subject’s consciousness and identity but also mediates relationships between the individual agent and the collectivity. Totemic geography underlies people’s multiple linkages, as spirit and flesh, to place, and thence to the spiritual realm of the Dreaming and its ideologies of immutability. Certain acts of the living may also be memorialised, inscribed and objectified in landscape. Using examples drawn from Mardu people of the Western Desert, I show that a necessary lack of closure in the religious system accommodates an inevitable dynamism; openness and flux are, in significant measure, consequences of broadly ecological variables. Notions of ‘immutability’ are thus challenged by the realities of life in a most marginal environment; and identity politics, while more complex than ideology alone would have us believe, are significantly constrained by a religiously saturated worldview.