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Introduction

It has long been recognised that the landscape has significance and special meaning for Aboriginal people and that prominent features invariably figure very strongly in that meaning. Attempts have been made to attribute this meaning to either the requirements of a subsistence economy or to ritual/spiritual needs, or both. Rockholes which provide vital water resources or stone quarries for example, could be argued to have meaning in terms of physical subsistence, whereas a cave painting, a stone arrangement or a mythological site could be seen as purely religious. Research I have conducted on the West Coast of South Australia suggests that the relationship between Indigenous Australians and the landscape is far more complex than these interpretations allow. In this paper, an attempt is made to explore the nature of such relationships by examining Aboriginal associations with rockholes near Ceduna, South Australia.

Background

This article evolves from research conducted during 1996, 1997 and the first half of 1998 with the assistance of funds made available by the National Estate Grants Program, through the Australian Heritage Commission. The project was initially designed to identify a collection of 158 historic photographs largely relating to Koonibba Aboriginal Mission. Koonibba was a former Lutheran-run Mission until 1964 and is now a self-determined Aboriginal community, located approximately 41 kilometres northwest of Ceduna on South Australia’s West Coast - see Figure 1. It was originally anticipated that, due to budget constraints, the photographs would be displayed for identification and a limited...
number of oral histories would be recorded. As the project progressed, the women of the Coleman family (descendants of Yabi Dinah) became very keen to share their experiences of Mission life. In addition, it became clear that for them the historical significance of the former Mission was inextricably linked with other features in the landscape, in particular the rockholes in the surrounding environment which they considered to be key sites bearing strong cultural attachments. These include Euria, Munjela, Koonibba, Inila, Little Inila, Yumburra and Dinah Rockholes and are located in Figure 1.

**Rockholes**

Only the stars look down upon the sleep of the still places of this earth of ours. Only the light loitering winds rest a moment to speak with them. Sunsets blaze and fade and blaze again for them, and dawn lays her diadem over them. The stars seem to hunt for little holes in the clouds to peep through at us. The wind settles down to a contented murmur amongst the mallee trees.

The area covered by this study has its own unique ecology and beauty. It covers an area extending 80 kilometres inland from the coast and represents part of the Gawler Craton, a portion of the earth’s crust comprising granites, gniesses and schist, which has not been affected by folding or faulting for 1450 million years. Exposure of these basement rocks occurs mainly on the shoreline, but also at various points inland where they can be seen to appear above the veneer of sediments. The sediments in this area consist of calcareous brown soils (or loam), originally covered with malice, black oak, sandalwood and native pine. Slightly further inland, the landscape transforms to one of parallel desert sandridges - 10 metres high, covered by myall, saltbush, bluebush and bullock-bush.

Native fauna in the area includes the western pygmy possum, Mitchell’s hopping mouse, hairy-nosed wombat, western grey and red kangaroos, echidnas and greater long-eared bats in small numbers. The introduced house mouse is evident at Inila Rock Waters. In addition, 57 bird species are present and several inactive mallee fowl nests were observed during fieldwork. Seven species of reptiles are prevalent, the most observable being the sleepy lizard.

Water has always been in low supply in the area. While some wells in the region pre-date European occupation, indicating that Aboriginal people have traditionally utilized this resource, there are no flowing streams and underground water supplies are difficult to locate. Rockholes, (also called gnammas), are granite outcrops which can contain either...
natural or manufactured indentations which till with water, providing resources which range from shallow ephemeral catchments to deep permanent wells, which were exploited as part of the traditional regional subsistence economy. Aboriginal people occupying arid areas have always managed their water resources strategically and comprehensively. Water is also still obtained from the roots of certain malice species and from the bulbous roots of the dvunggu dyungga (a type of watery yam) but rockholes historically represented the major source of inland water to Aboriginal people, who often constructed stone lids to minimise evaporation and exploitation by animals.

The archaeological record at the rockholes attests to a long history of visitation by Aboriginal people. Hearths and more durable dietary remains such as quandong seeds and mammal bone fragments show that camping took place at the sites - in some cases for extended periods - and an often dense and usually diverse lithic assemblage - in some cases sourced from hundreds of kilometres away - indicates that the rockholes represented strategic economic sites by travelling communities. Inila Rock Waters is one of the many sites which are rich in archaeological material culture. The rock outcrop contains a virtually permanent rockhole about two metres deep, shown in Figure 2 in winter, when it also
contained several large ephemeral ponds. The sand dunes to the north and south of the granite exposure contain a wealth of archaeological material attributed to dense seasonal occupation over time.

Some of the ceremonial significance of the rockholes has been documented by Daisy Bates \(^\text{11}\), who lived and worked with the Aboriginal people of the West Coast in the early years of this century. Bates talks about ‘Yuria’ (Euria) Rockhole, one of the study Sites, where she notes that large seasonal gatherings took place for ceremonies, at the conclusion of which:

‘what might have been a community relapsed into its family groups, each group wending its way by its appointed roads to its own waters’ \(^\text{12}\)

Indeed, Bates \(^\text{12}\) highlights family connections with the rockholes by recording in notebook form the names of family groups associated with certain rockholes in the Ooldea region, together with associated stories, ‘totems’ and language - for example, ‘ngura mulur’ = ‘our own waters’, ‘abu’ = ‘stone, granite’ \(^\text{14}\). These family connections with certain ‘waters’ appear not to have been simplistic, as Bates records that while certain rockholes ‘belong’ to certain people, some are ‘friendly’ to other people. These sorts of complexities of association are continuing today, as older and ‘more traditional’ people share their knowledge with younger West Coast people and negotiate territorial and visitation rights.

While Bates talks of ceremonial events at Eurua Rockhole, she also notes the connection between stories and rockholes. She records that:

All permanent native waters have legends attached to them, legends of the ‘dream’ times, which go back to the days when birds and animals possessed human attributes, or were human beings, or were human groups of which the bird or animal was the representative, or were magic animals and birds possessing the power of human speech \(^\text{15}\).

What became clear during the recording of oral histories for this project was that stories are a powerful connecting force between each of the rockholes and the others, between people and rockholes, and between people and people, both past and present. Many memories prompted stories about the rockholes. Sue Haseldine related one of the stories which was passed down to her from her Grandmother:

the one about the giant. I don’t know where he came from but he came through Iron Knob and he was carrying a real heavy load and he dropped some of the load off at Iron Knob, Iron Baron, and on the way through, all through the back, all the rockholes is where he offloaded bits and pieces of his load. And he came to the Koonibba Rockhole and he knelt down there to have a drink and the old people used to show us his footprints still there and his knee marks where he knelt and there’s a couple of other rockholes out the back that’s got very similar markings as the Koonibba one. But apparently the giant kept going through to the west and he disappeared into the Kimberleys, so I don’t know whether he formed the Kimberleys or not, but he disappeared there \(^\text{16}\).

The story of the Seven Sisters also features strongly in this region, as it does in different variations in other parts of the country, and holds strong personal meaning for the Coleman women. Colleen Prideaux is the eldest of six sisters and remembers:

Mum always used to say, ‘There’s six of you…….’ - me and Mercy and Margo and Sue and Sheena and Bronwyn - and there needed to be one more. And see my grandmother always said, ‘Oh there’s only six of you! Only six wangi mooga. Where is the seventh one?’ That’s what she was always saying. ‘Where is the seventh one?’ And I always thought because she always used to say, ‘That’s you stars up there, the Seven Sisters’ But we didn’t have the seventh girl in our family. We used to camp outside our house on hot summer’s nights at Koonibba and she used to say, ‘Oh there are six girls’ (the Seven Sisters constellation). \(^\text{17}\)

For Aboriginal people, rockholes represent more than just a source of essential water and a ceremonial gathering point. They represent a focal bond between Aboriginal people and their landscape.

**Rockholes Since European Contact**

Koonibba Mission was established in response to building pressure from around 1860 when the first pastoral lease on the West Coast was taken out at Yalta \(^\text{18}\), to the end of the nineteenth century as the pastoral frontier spread along the coast \(^\text{19}\) disrupting Aboriginal life and displacing Aboriginal people from their traditional domains.

While it is not possible to ascertain exact tribal boundaries, according to Tindale \(^\text{20}\), at the time of European occupation the West Coast was occupied by the Miming, Wirangu, Nauo, Gugatha (Kokathal Gugada) and Ngalea tribal groups. The Miming occupied the western-most portion of the coast from Western Australia to around the Head of Bight and Wirangu from Head of Bight to Steaky Bay and inland. These tribes were linked by intermarriage, trade and ceremonial practices. The Nauo occupied the coastal region to the east of the Wirangu and the Gugatha occupied the inland arid sand dune area to the north, where the subject rockholes are located.

In 1897, the Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia decided to establish a new mission on the West Coast and Pastor H. Kemp was asked to find a suitable location. He was guided to an area below Koonibba (recorded by Tindale in the late 1930s as a corruption of Kundruba \(^\text{21}\) Rockhole by Micky Free. Micky Free was born in Eucla in 1868 of a Miming mother (Tjabiltja) and a European father (Michael Lawrie) and grew up around Fowlers Bay. As well as being descendants of Yabi Dinah, the Coleman women are also descendants of Micky Free, who featured prominently in the early history of Koonibba Mission and who influenced Aboriginal people to adopt mission life \(^\text{22}\).
By the time Koonibba Mission was established, many West Coast Aboriginal people had been forced by decreasing access to resources to adopt a pragmatic approach to the government’s segregation policies and the missionaries’ efforts to Christianise them, by accepting that they would need to adapt to mission life in order to survive. While Micky Free undoubtedly adopted this pragmatism, he did not necessarily act to relinquish his culture. It could be argued that the site he selected for the Mission was a culturally strategic choice, as it represents one of the nearest water sources to the township of Ceduna and a site of major cultural significance to Aboriginal people 21. By situating the Mission in the vicinity of Koonibba Rockhole, Aboriginal links with an important feature in the landscape could more easily be maintained, thus preserving cultural continuity. In acting as a force in converting Aboriginal people to the Mission and thereby gaining power and favour from the Missionaries, Micky Free could in fact have been acting as an agent of cultural cohesiveness. Indeed, despite the efforts of the Missionaries to eradicate languages and cultural practices (as a result of the ‘civilizing’ policies of the time), traditional ceremonies were still being conducted at Koonibba into the late 1950s 24. Traditional hunting - of kangaroos, wombats and rabbits; and gathering - of quandongs (burrah), bush tomatoes (warlga), pig-face (bildi bildi) and other plant foods, as well as mallee hen eggs; was practiced at the same time that rations were received, and traditional cooking methods were employed as well as European methods. Particular bushes were used to make household brooms 25 and medicines and curatives were made from native vegetation. Single men lived on the Mission in wiltjas or wurlies, and wurlies were constructed at the coastal holiday sites of Denial Bay and Davenport Creek, in which families slept on mattresses of dried seaweed 26 Corroborees were also held at Denial Bay 27.

Besides the continuation of these cultural practices, it was also noted during the interviews that the younger interviewees all frequently spoke fluent Aboriginal language, while the older women used only the odd word of language. This could be attributed to Mission training, which discouraged the use of language, something which does not influence the younger interviewees, who left mission life as children 28. While subtle, the inference is that the tradition of language was maintained despite pressure to relinquish it and as such could be seen as a form of resistance and agency on behalf of Aboriginal people. A further indicator of the maintenance of tradition is that first cousins are still considered, and called, ‘sister’ and ‘brother’ and the parents of this generation are all ‘mothers’ and ‘fathers’ 29.

The adaptation, resistance and survival techniques of Aboriginal people against Europeanisation have been discussed elsewhere. 30 What is interesting for the purpose of this article is that a major focus for maintaining cultural continuity in this instance was a rockhole. The association with this and the other rockholes continued (and continues today) through the generations. Sue Haseldine remembers visits to Koonibba Rockhole:

> And the Mission Rockhole, we always went up there. My Grandmother took us kids up there. She’d sit down and chip away at mica while us kids would just play around the rockhole itself but we spent a lot of hours up there. 31

Sue also remembers going on ‘big treks’ with the men:

> They’d take days sometimes - gone for days. I really can’t remember what it was all about. It wasn’t really hunting either, it was something else. We’d go right out to Inila and places like that - Munjela - out to the rockholes back further and I really don’t know what they got up to. 32

Sue’s Aunt Kit Haseldine remembers trips with her father:

> He used to take us right out in the bushes, we used to walk for miles the other side of Koonibba. All the kids, when I was a kid; we used to go for a walk for miles. My mother used to go the other side of the Mission Rockhole and dig for wild potatoes and sugar ants - djuggan they’re called. And when one of the family would get sick with stomach problems = diarrhoea or whatever - my parents would go out into the bush and get some bush medicine for their - stomach. 33

Rockholes as Cultural Markers

Deborah Bird Rose 35 has discussed the Aboriginal concept of country as ‘nourishing terrain’ and has defined the landscape as:

> a place that gives and receives life. Not just imagined or represented, it is lived in and lived with.

She describes the relationship between people and a country as similar to that between people, in which sense country is perceived as a living entity with a past and a future and with feelings and needs which deserve the respect a person would give to another person’s feelings and needs. For her, Aboriginal country can be sea country, land country or sky country, which exists ‘both in and through time’, the management of which ‘constitutes one of Aboriginal people’s strongest and deepest purposes in life’.

> Rockholes, soaks, wells, rivers, claypans, springs and the like form part of the subsistence geography of country and invariably part of the sacred geography as well. 35

This was the sort of connection which was exposed through the oral histories of the Coleman women. Despite the fact that Aboriginal people have for many years been limited by lack of access to the resources necessary to enable them to visit many of the more remote hinterland rockholes, which can now only be reached by four wheel drive vehicles, they relish any opportunity they get to visit their beloved rockholes (and other sites). Some of the older generation who had not visited the rockholes for many years still had vivid memories going back to childhood of visits with their parents or grandparents.

For Mercy Glastonbury:
If I went back there, I would know those areas, but I haven’t been there for so many years, because I got taken away, but it’s still really very dear to my heart. We always looked on that country as ours, because our Grandfather and Uncles used to go on foot, hunting to get googa (meat) for the families. It’s a psychological attachment to land. And this is what a lot of people don’t understand today is that just because you’re not on your land, but that to us doesn’t mean a damn thing. You’ve still got the psychological attachment to the land. In the Aboriginal way, for me, my afterbirth is buried in that soil there at the Mission and where my afterbirth is, that’s my land, that’s my munda (spirit land), that’s my place. And there’s the wider country that I’m still psychologically attached to, and this is what white fellas don’t understand. Just because they say, ‘Oh, you haven’t been out there and treated the place in a traditional manner’, it doesn’t mean to say that we don’t have any other connections with it. It’s all up here, psychologically.’  

For Aboriginal people the landscape of the rockholes represents a complexity of interwoven meanings. The rockholes are interconnected with each other and their custodians by stories which give each dependence for meaning on the others. Some of these stories are universally shared; others are gender-restricted. In some cases, siblings have been handed down different individual stories which are linked. When the individual stories are put together they create a larger story:

Coleen Prideaux: But in relation to the rockholes out there, I’ve got a story and my sister’s got a slightly different story. Well it is a different one, but it’s still connected.
Bronwyn Sleep: See all the stories, they’re all connected but they each one has a different one and you put it together and you can get the big picture.

Most of the rockholes have gendered relevance - many are women’s sites, some are men’s and some are both men’s and women’s sites at different times, according to rigid rules of right and sacred strictures.

The women of the Coleman family are concerned at what they see as increasing threats to their sites of significance by mineral exploration in the region. As self-appointed site conservationists like their parents and grandparents before them, they make regular maintenance visits to the sites, to keep waterholes clean and free of debris.
and to ensure that sites are not disturbed by outside influences. An understanding into the nature of the relationship between Aboriginal people and the rockholes gives insight into the devastation any such disturbance to these sites would cause the custodians to feel.

Conclusion
The rockholes to the northwest of Ceduna are of great significance to the women of the Coleman family. These sites represent a mesh of physical and metaphysical bonds between Indigenous people and country. They are linked by Tjukurpa (Dreamtime) stories which have been passed down matrilineally and have been visited by family members for generations.

This project has demonstrated the importance and complexities of significant places in the landscape to Aboriginal people and the role of these places in perpetuating and fostering Aboriginal culture and cultural connections. The study has shown that Aboriginal people have had continuing associations with pre-contact sites, while new sites have also taken on meaning as people were forced to adapt to the limitations placed on them by the dominant culture. As historic sites, missions in particular constitute sites of national significance as they represent a dramatic cultural timeframe for Aboriginal people, who were forced to relinquish some of their traditional tribal and clan group autonomy when they had to live and cooperate with other groups, often on unfamiliar land. Despite the rapid change and adaptation that was required of Aboriginal people during the era of the missions, it is clear that connections with the landscape were not only retained, but that the rockholes, as significant sites maintaining multi-faceted meanings were and still are instrumental in maintaining cultural continuity.

Acknowledgements
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ENDNOTES
2. Anderson, Sue, 'Koonibba Mission, South Australia: Aboriginal historic site recording' (June 1998), A Report to the National Estate Grants Program, Koonibba Community Council Inc., and the Descendants of Yabi Dinah. Other research relating to rockholes on the West Coast includes 1998 clearances by Scott Cane for the Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement and a National Estate Grants Program project by Annie Nicholson - 'Iwara Kapi: Rock waters of the Ceduna area' (1999), A Report for the Ceduna Aboriginal Community Council. Keryn Walshe and I gave a joint presentation at the Oral History Association of Australia Conference in September 1977, which compared my research results with non-Aboriginal perspectives, in relation to prospective mining in the region. Keryn Walshe is also conducting a National Estate Grants project in Jellabirna Regional Reserve. All of these researchers have had generous access to the resources gathered over more than 20 years of research on the West Coast by Torn Gara, who visited many of the rockholes in the 1980s with Aboriginal elders, many of whom have since passed away.
3. Held by the then South Australian Department of State Aboriginal Affairs.
4. As a result, I recorded approximately seven and a quarter hours of oral histories with eight people. These recordings were conducted with recording equipment provided by the J.D. Somerville Oral History Collection of the Mortlock Library of South Australiana, where tapes and transcripts are held (0H36511-8).
10. Sue Haseldine, 0H365/2.
12. ibid., p.157.
14. ibid., p.10.
17. Sleep/Prideaux, 0H365/6, p.15; Mercy Glastonbury 0H365/8, p.21.
19. Gara, Tom, Aboriginal Historical Associations with the Southern Nullarbor Plain, South Australia (in prep.), p.21.
22. Marcena Richards, 0H365/7, p.11.
25. Pearl Seidel, 0H365/1, p.6.
27. Gletys Haseldine, 0H365/7, p.8.
29. Sue Haseldine, op. cit., p.20.
31. Sue Haseldine, op. cit., p.11.
32. ibid. p.16.
35. Rose, op. cit., p.50.
37. Sleep/Prideaux, op. cit., p.15.
38. Scott Cane, pers. comm.