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SHORT REPORTS

Filming at Cape Keerweer, Queensland, 1977

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Abstract

In the 1970s Wik people of Cape York Peninsula, Queensland, engaged keenly with anthropologists and film-makers in the recording of their lives and their pasts. They were far more than ‘subjects’ in these processes, turning them very much to their own ends. While a new technology, the camera offered an expansion to an already powerfully constituted Wik domain, that of imagery. The power of this domain was rooted both in the Wik peoples’ spiritual view of the visible self, and in their highly developed use of imagery in the competitive pursuit of influence and status. They used the films made by others to pursue for themselves the recognition, respect, patronage, name and notoriety they felt was their due.

Foreword

In 1978 I gave a paper at an international Ethnographic Film Conference sponsored by the then Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (now AIATSIS), in Canberra. The paper was called ‘Some observations on Aboriginal use of filming at Cape Keerweer, 1977’. Several colleagues with an interest in the role of film in anthropology have suggested to me over the years that it should be published, so here it is, slightly revised, in the section below. Before that, however, some background.

The Aboriginal people who took part in the 1978 conference included David Gulpilil, Marcia Langton, Narritjin Maymuru and Thomas Woody Minipini. Among the film-makers were David and Judith MacDougall, Roger Sandall, Kim McKenzie, Karl Heider, Peter Loizos and Jay Ruby. This was the Ucko approach: Peter Ucko, then Principal of AIAS, broke with precedent as usual and in this case, as in so many others, brought together in one place those whose intersections in life
were crucial to the furtherance of the scholarly record of Indigenous Australia, as well as international figures of weight. This meant flying in people from many distant places, both bush and overseas.

The conference was the occasion of a significant breakpoint in the pattern of relationships between Indigenous Australians and ethnographic film-making. It marked a shift from Aboriginal people being largely regarded as the subjects of film, and non-Aboriginal people being regarded as the makers of films about Aborigines, to the very different collaborative or mixed reality that quickly became the norm thereafter. There was protest along these lines within the conference, even a press release written by Karl Heider demanding Aboriginal people be given access to the power of film and not be excluded from the production process (Bryson 2002:65). My paper approached this theme from a slightly different angle – the way the ‘subjects’ in my experience had turned themselves into ‘agents’ without owning a cine camera.

In 1977 I was busily mapping sites and clan countries with traditional owners of the Cape Keerweer region in western Cape York Peninsula, Queensland (Figure 1). These people are part of the wider Wik people of the region. Our relationship was and remains both familial and professional, since I had been taken as a son by the late Victor Wolmby of Cape Keerweer in 1976 (see Sutton 2011:1, 2, 25, 87, 88, 100, 107 – on the Wik people generally, their material culture and our extensive landscape mapping of the region over some decades see e.g., Karntin and Sutton 1986; Martin 1993; McConnel 1953, 1957; Sutton 1987, 1994a, 1994b, 2003, 2010a, 2010b; Sutton et al. 1990; von Sturmer 1978; Wolmby et al. 1990).

When not based at Peret (more precisely Watha-nhiin) Outstation 60 kilometres south of Aurukun Mission we were living in shifting camps, and at any location were always combining hunting, fishing and food gathering with ethnography. The MacDougalls were then making the Aurukun Series of films while based at the Mission. They came down by boat to Cape Keerweer and on about 17–19 October 1977 made a film of our activities, which was later released as *Familiar Places* (1980). My narration for the film was recorded by David MacDougall in Canberra in 1979 while watching an early cut, in the same way Coniston Johnny had narrated *Coniston Muster*...
(Roger Sandall 1972) and Thomas Minipini had narrated *Goodbye Old Man* (David MacDougall 1977), an insight we owe to Ian Bryson (2002:63).

![Figure 1 Location of Cape Keerweer, Cape York Peninsula.](image)

**Figure 1** Location of Cape Keerweer, Cape York Peninsula.

**Filming at Cape Keerweer**

While mapping clan countries under the instruction of Cape Keerweer people on the Aurukun Reserve, north Queensland, in 1977 I was able to learn something about the use of ethnographic filming by Aboriginal people. David and Judith MacDougall were present for part of the time, filming the mapping and other activities.

All of those working with me in the 1970s had been to the Aurukun open-air picture shows out on the grass in front of the Mission house. The enthusiasm for films was great. One Friday at my main field base, Peret Outstation, which then had no electricity, no film projector or screen, a rumour ran around like wildfire that films were going to be shown on Saturday night. One young man approached me and asked what film I was going to show. He was bitterly disappointed when I told him there no films to be shown and no way of showing them. Later he
was the first person at Peret to import a Polaroid instant colour camera. I was often asked to take photographs of shed-building, fencing and the clearing of airstrips with hand-tools, as evidence that the people were working hard to build up their outstations. It was the visual media that people privileged as a means of convincing Church and federal government authorities of their efforts.

The films they had seen told stories. Genres were identified: Cowboy, Sword-Fight-Film, and so on. ‘Story’, in Wik English, had a wide range of connotations. In the linguistic usage of the area, words that an anthropologist would translate as ‘totem’ or ‘mythic figure’ or ‘sacred legend’ were all translated by the people themselves as ‘Story’. Totems are essentially emblems which distinguish one clan from another, and also, when shared, may provide links between different clans and their members. The Story, the totem as cultural property, is a principal element in distinctive clan identity and thus in the land ownership system. Totemic sites in the region are called Story Places in English. This does not mean that all totems and totemic sites are associated with narratives, indeed most are not. Narratives are known specifically by other terms than terms for totems.

Nonetheless it is clear that the concept of the totem in Wik thought is deeply akin to that of narrative. A clan may be referred to by singling out one of its characteristic totems, preceded by the term Wik (e.g., Wik Thuulk, ‘Brolga Wik’). The word wik refers to speech, word, dialect variety, a message, a telling, and does not mean totem specifically. There are other terms for that, such as, in the Wik-Ngathan language, may kooenhiy (‘vegetable-food sibling’) and minh kooenhiy (‘meat sibling’). The phrase wik al (‘old wik’) means ‘narrative, tale, story’.

Film can be used as story, as a telling, but also as an act of marking, in a similar way to totemic identification, as it was in this 1977 case. The primary content of such a story is me and my mob. The performance in front of a camera is a platform for self-assertion and the assertion of the inner kin group. It is an exercise in distinction. Classical Wik culture does distinction with rococo finesse.

In the Cape Keerweer region, in the local languages, to say that a person or a thing is herself/himself or itself is the
same as saying that it is different. Self-existence entails being different. Being filmed asserts one’s existence relative to others, just as being associated with a particular set of totems asserts one’s independent clan identity in a bonded system of totemic contrasts. One is, in Wik thought, said to be ‘in’ a certain totem, just as one is ‘in’ a film. The person who gets filmed is immediately in contrast with those who did not get filmed. He or she is said to have been ‘put in that film’, or ‘the film-makers have got them in that film now’, and they are later going to ‘put them on that screen’.

Of course people are aware that what they are talking about is pictures rather than persons themselves being captured on film. But it is not that simple. The notion of one’s image, to a Cape Keerweer person, is much closer to one’s sense of personal identity than it is for a Westerner. Each person, they believe, has a body (nhuth), a soul or spirit (koetheth), and a spirit-image (koetheth maayn) (examples in Wik-Ngathan). When you die, your soul goes immediately to rest far out to sea in the Gulf of Carpentaria at a place called Onchen. Onchen is internally undifferentiated as to the origin-identities of its spirits. It is the home of the apolitical self, like the sky in some other traditions. But your spirit-image, your maayn, must be called up from your geographical clan estate soon after death and, once it is near and visible as a glow in the dark, it is sung away, to fly to rest in your clan’s spirit-image centre, which is back in the area of your totemic country, your clan home. Closely allied clans may share a common spirit-image centre (aak pam-kaawkeyn ‘person-sending place’) that reflects their alliances. Your maayn is, among other things, your geopolitical self. It is a representation, as representative, of your group.

This term for image (maayn) is also applied to sculptures, paintings, photographs, cine film – and fenced paddocks. In relation to the self the term refers to the outside dimension of selfhood, the corporeal envelope, one’s outline, the picture one presents, the character one plays. A person on film is thus in a sense an image of their image. In Aboriginal thought generally, simulacra are inherently and powerfully meaningful. Likeness is power. Representation is reality.

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1 Pronounced [maːn].
Beyond the rather diffuse function of being filmed for self- and group-assertion, there are a number of very specific uses to which Aboriginal people in my experience have put this particular medium. A principal specific use of this kind is registration, in which claims of various sorts – even land claims – are made formally, publicly and replicably: the assertion will recur each time the film is shown.

When I began mapping countries in this area I was not fully aware that the devising of maps of clan countries was being seen by the people themselves as the registration of land claims, both in relation to the local and mutual Wik political audience and – to a lesser extent – in relation to the wider world outside. This certainly has been the case, however.

On an occasion when I left the group at Peret Outstation in 1977 to return to the south, Apelech ritual was performed. This involved singing the totemic songs relating to the increase centres we had been mapping that season. Interpolated into the ritual were formal speeches by older men summarising the year’s travels. The sketches, notes, tape recordings and photographs I had used were media in which social, territorial and political assertions had been registered, just as they were also registered and displayed in the other, more traditional media of narrative, song, dance, carved objects, body painting.

While David and Judith were filming one day, an older man chose his moment on screen to publicly announce a territorial takeover by his family of part of the land of another family, members of which were still alive. I suggest this could not have happened at a public meeting consisting only of local people, at least not without conflagration. The use of outsiders’ media in this case was important, enabling. The use of outsiders or neutrally-placed insiders as ‘umpires’, arbitrators or go-betweens is, in Wik society, traditional (Sutton 2010c:5-6).

In a Wik dispute, of which there were and are a great many, the proper person to intervene and attempt to settle or tend the matter is a relative outsider, one who has little or no vested interest in any particular side of the debate. Such a person, often called a ‘peacemaker’ in English, is known as a pant or pantu, depending on language. The pant should come from some distance away, and preferably have a reputation for strength. Agreeing to a truce may involve simply agreeing to the demands of the pantu. This can be done without loss of face. Non-
Aboriginal police and other outsiders are frequently looked to and pressed or cajoled into taking this role. William MacKenzie, who ran Aurukun Mission from the 1920s to the 1960s, played such a role, although he also ruled as a despot over the whole community, so he was in that regard a previously unheard-of political phenomenon. In any case, MacKenzie, I was told, had a ‘big book’ in which he wrote down the totemic names and country affiliations of the Wik people. He registered, at some level, who they were as clanspeople and land owners. I was doing the same. I was sceptical about this report of MacKenzie ethnographically recording Wik individuals until I came upon the hundreds of personal data cards mainly filled out by Bill.2 There he and others meticulously recorded for each person Big and Small totemic clan names, Umbilical Cord names, genealogical relationships, and, often, the area or dialect of the person. It is an extraordinary resource.

Figure 2 Johnny Lak Lak Ampeybegan recording the site Wachnyathaw during ethnographic mapping near Small Lake, Cape York Peninsula, 23 October 1976. Photograph by Peter Sutton (Roll 5 Shot 14).

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2 Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies Library Ms 1525/34 item 239.
I was always taken by the keenness with which senior Wik people, usually the recognised heads of their respective clans, took the initiative in engaging with me in the ethnographic process (e.g., Figure 2). This process became, for a while, a significant domain of local politics. One after the other, people whose countries had not yet been mapped anthropologically approached myself or my colleague David Martin with requests that their land be included in the mapping programme. In 1977 I was sent by members of the core Cape Keerweer clans to the heads of several clans whose countries lay nearby. I was to ask them whether or not they wanted to 'be in the Cape Keerweer map'. Most agreed. One, Billy Comprabar, refused, stating that he didn’t want to be ‘in that Shark’ (a major cult totem of the core Cape Keerweer clans). He also wanted a fenced paddock to separate his land from theirs and to 'keep that Shark outside'. Being ‘in the map’ was akin to being ‘in the Shark (totem)’. Such was the power of capture by medium.

In another case, a man with local political aspirations, Bruce Yunkaporta, approached the Mission superintendent and dictated to him an account of the leadership dispute that was then going on between Bruce’s wife and one of her clan brothers. He told the rather mystified superintendent to keep a copy of this record in his office, and to convey a copy of it to me. He was also most insistent that I photograph him frequently. He was not alone in actively seeking out exogenous recording media in which he could be represented.

The uses of outside-derived media I have discussed so far are all related to aspirations within the community. But film and other media, especially books, were also seen as important means of validating and registering local selves and claims in the eyes of non-Aboriginal people in Canberra, Brisbane (the capital of Queensland), and other powerful places, including America. Bruce Yunkaporta once asked me in which direction America lay. I pointed to two opposite directions, on the basis that the Earth is a globe. He was not amused. On another occasion he informed me that ‘the President is coming to Aurukun on Tuesday’. ‘Which President?’ ‘Mr Carter.’ (Jimmy Carter was then the US President.) I said I didn’t think Mr Carter had ever heard of Aurukun. Bruce regarded this idea scornfully. Recognition of the Wik people at this international level was only natural, just and proper. As it turned out, it was Vernon Carter, a mining company
employee, who stepped off the small plane at Aurukun’s dirt airstrip on the Tuesday.

American recognition of the Wik people’s extraordinary sculptural tradition did indeed come some years after this, when the *Dreamings* exhibition was shown in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles in 1988–89. I made sure there was a photograph of Bruce Yunkaporta with his wife Marjorie and some of their many children published in the catalogue (Sutton 1988:28, Fig. 31), as I was sure he would have expected this. I sent a copy of the book to Marjorie and Bruce. Bruce was convinced that Donald Thomson’s photograph of two young women taken at Aurukun in 1933, which also appeared in the book (Sutton 1988:27, Fig. 27) was an image of the mythical Two Young Women of Cape Keerweer. He believed this photograph had been taken in the Dreamtime.

Depicting, representing, showing, are all features held in common between both film and ritual, and between both film and a landscape that consists of the scars, impresses and bodily leavings of the first Beings. The land is a map, as Wik man Denny Bowenda once said to me (Sutton 1988:19). The higher mysteries in Aboriginal societies were mainly revealed, not by hours of verbal explanation, but by showing, by the revelation of sacred objects, body paint, dance movements, songs, names. In the Wik area, the last members of a dying clan could express a living will by taking their chosen successor around the country and ‘showing’ that person its wells, places with which the successor would already have been quite familiar in most cases. The showing was formal. It was exposure for the record. Similarly, a political alliance with a distant family could be formalised by taking one of its members to your own country and showing that person its wells, shades and yam patches.

In 1976, just outside Aurukun in the bush, I was asked by senior men to photograph some carved objects in seclusion prior to a ceremony. When the performance took place, the assembled Aurukun community, including staff families, were shown two of these objects and photographs were permitted, indeed posed-for. Some other carved objects were shown but only from a considerable distance. The ritual boss, Clive Yunkaporta, ran between the dancers holding these objects and the crowd of onlookers, firmly stating that in this case no photographs were permitted. The tension between the desire to
show, prove, register and validate on the one hand, and to control access to objects of precious value, on the other, provides problems for such groups in deciding what is or is not to be filmed. Furthermore, it reinforces the significance of the visual media in their society.

When filming is ‘permitted’, in such a context, it is a mistake to see this permission as being inevitably a passive acquiescence out of mere politeness, cooperativeness or desire for money. In many cases film is instead being actively used. The view that ethnographic film-making was simply exploitative, and that films of Aboriginal people should all be made by Aboriginal people themselves, would not allow or recognise as legitimate the use of outsiders and their media for insiders’ ends.

References


