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EDITORS
Amy Roberts and Lynley A. Wallis
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

COMMENT ON SUTTON 2015

Robert Layton

1 University of Durham, Anthropology Department, Durham, DH1 3LE, United Kingdom

Sutton’s 2015 paper is devoted to disputing the existence of the patrilineal descent groups in the Western Desert, that were claimed by early ethnographers such as Berndt (1959) and, in particular, Tindale (1972). But the flexibility of recruitment to land-holding groups in the Western Desert has already been recorded by Tonkinson and Myers, as well as in my own research. According to Tonkinson:

(B)irth on the estate is not the only criterion for membership; a person can be a member by virtue of having been conceived there, or because of his or her father’s membership of the estate-group (and through the mother to her natal estate, although this linkage is less often stressed).

(Tonkinson 1978:51, his parenthesis)

Flexible in size, movement, and membership, the band is prevented from becoming a free-floa...
Myers (1986:128) wrote:

(1)andholding groups take essentially the form of bilateral, descending kindreds....Identification is an ongoing process, subject to claim and counterclaim....It enables claims of identification to be transformed into rights over related aspects of country.

In conflict with these accounts of the flexible processes through which people become members of local groups, Sutton argued for the primary importance of place of birth and here lies my disagreement. He wrongly claimed that in my 1995 paper on affiliation to the land in the Uluru area ‘I failed to sustain (my) earlier emphasis on local descent groups and admitted that (my) anthropology had been influenced by legal requirements’ (Sutton 2015:63). My 1995 paper was a reflection on the processes that lead to a person’s primary affiliation to a particular ngura (‘country’ or ‘estate’). While I asked (p. 212) ‘why was my model of “ambilineal descent”...not always able to predict how people would account for their own affiliation?’ my primary aim was to discuss how Indigenous and anthropological discourses could be reconciled, in order to understand Indigenous social process from an anthropological perspective.

In my 1983 paper I reviewed the Aboriginal evidence in the Uluru claim, and considered how my understanding of the complexity of processes of affiliation to country developed in the course of the claim hearing. I quoted the Commissioner’s report on the Borroloola Claim, in which he described the anthropologist as an expert dealing with general anthropological propositions such as the concept of clans and territories (Layton 1983b:227). Toward the end of that paper I argued (p. 233) ‘[p]roviding its status as a model is made explicit, there is surely something to be said for keeping the anthropologist’s account as simple as possible...A useful model should aim to isolate and describe the underlying processes of Aboriginal custom which are relevant to the Land Rights Act’.

It soon became clear during my field work between 1977 and 1979 that descent groups in which men always remained in their father’s clan did not exist in the Western
Desert. Although I had not worked extensively with societies of that type when I carried out my Uluru field work, I did become familiar with such a system when later researching two land claims among the Alawa, who have patrilineal clans and semi-moieties (e.g., Layton 1999).

In the Uluru region of the Western Desert rights to land were associated with a scatter of sites around a (semi) permanent water source, referred to as a ngura or ‘country’. The set of people affiliated to a ngura were spoken of as utulu—a band or ‘mob’ (cf. Goddard 1987), or nguraritja tjuta—all the people belonging to that place. The Pitjantjatara and Yankunytjatjara (Anangu) with whom I worked in the preparation of the Uluru land claim told me that an individual could claim membership in the ngura (estate) in which their birthplace was located, or the ngura of their father or that of their mother. The aggregate data I collected from older people showed that approximately 70% of these claimants were acknowledged to be members of their father’s local group, 20% their mother’s and the remainder that of a more distant relative. To characterise the local descent group I therefore relied on the model of ambilineal descent that had already been documented in Polynesia by Goodenough (1955), in which a person can choose whether to join their father’s or mother’s land-holding group.

During the Aboriginal evidence in the Uluru land claim, witnesses spoke of choosing, ngurkantananyi (Layton 1983a:24). Where inheritance of rights from one or other parent, or a more distant relative, is not automatic, individuals must demonstrate which affiliation they have chosen. Much of the Aboriginal evidence in the Uluru claim was devoted to the processes, which Sutton downplays, of demonstrating one’s allegiance to a ngura through practical commitment: looking after the land and caring for other members of the group (Layton 1983b). Given the unpredictable desert environment, people were reluctant to commit themselves to a single estate. I discussed this (Layton 1983a:25–6) and noted the problem it posed in the claim, particularly with regard to the affiliation of children who had not begun to exercise their options. Tonkinson noted the same phenomenon among the Mardudjara, writing: ‘Membership criteria are not rigorously defined, and although most men maintain a primary allegiance to one group and secondary
allegiances to a number of others, options always exist and are sometimes exercised’ (Tonkinson 1978:51).

My 1995 paper was based on a rereading of my field notes through which I gained a deeper appreciation of what the Anangu had told me. The paper aimed to provide a more detailed account of the long processes by which an individual develops his or her primary affiliation to a particular ngura. Rather than denying that the model presented at the land claim was appropriate, the paper asked why it needed refinement more accurately to represent Anangu processes of rights to land (ngura wîtîni = holding the country). The aim was to unpack the social processes that tended to generate the outcomes I had attempted to represent in my model of ambilineal descent.

The start of the person’s life-long process of developing associations with the land is their embodiment of an ancestral being, their personal tjukur. This happens at the place of ‘birth’, i.e., where the stub of the umbilical cord falls off. At that moment, the spirit of the ancestor embodied at the site enters the baby like a lizard burrowing into sand that closes behind it (pulyi, a burrow, cf Goddard 1987). This is how the individual obtains his/her kurunpa—self, or agency—but it is only a starting point in the individual’s attachment to country. It may become crucial, or it may be dismissed as trivial, unytju (Layton 1995:221, cf Sutton 2015:36). Contrary to Sutton’s (2015:26) information, the Anangu with whom I worked did not necessarily regard personal identity as the ‘privileged pathway to country’. Moreover, by virtue of the routes of different, intersecting routes of ancestral beings and sites associated with non-travelling ancestors, there are many sites imbued with the creative power of different ancestral beings in any estate. For example: hare wallaby, python, poisonous snake and blue-tongue lizard at Uluru, plains kangaroo, brush-tailed possum and thorny devil lizard at Katajuta. Thus, even people belonging to the same estate may well have different personal tjukur and people from different estates on the route of a particular ancestor the same personal tjukur. This renders Tindale’s data listed in Sutton’s Table 1 less informative than they might appear.
Sutton and I agree that membership of a group holding country is not based on presumptively inheriting shared descent from a single ancestral being who delimited the boundaries of the estate, as it is in much of northern Australia. But membership is based on ‘choosing’ a country and over time demonstrating your commitment to that country by sharing responsibilities to protect sites and perform rituals with other members of the band (uṭulu). The process was described to me as Ngura walytja ringanyi—becoming a carer of, or kinsperson to, the land (Layton 1995:223–4). Like place of birth, father’s and mother’s countries/ngura provide potential rights. The identity of the personal tjukur is therefore not in itself very informative about ultimate rights/responsibilities to a particular estate. Sutton dwells on the acquisition of personal identity at the expense of the ‘multiple other factors’ (Sutton 2015:32) that result in developing membership of a band and its estate over time.

References


