

Nuclear Colonialism in the South Australian Desert

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Abstract

In 1998 the Kungka Tjuta people from the desert country in the northern part of South Australia began a political campaign against plans by the federal government to set up a nuclear waste dump in their country. For many Australians the decision to locate such a toxic waste dump in the desert seemed appropriate because the desert has always seemed to be a 'blank space' without real value; however, for the Kungka Tjuta it is their home and the painful legacy of the atomic bomb tests carried out in their country in the 1950s is still part of their daily life. The very fact that the federal government was eventually forced to abandon plans for this dump demonstrates that public attitudes towards the desert are slowly changing. However, this paper argues that there is still much we can learn from the way the Kungka Tjuta ran their successful campaign to prevent a repeat of the earlier poisoning of their home lands.

Keywords

Rethinking desert, anti-nuclear, indigenous knowledge.

I'm not sure where the starting point for this story is. Perhaps it's 2000, when I first travelled out to the South Australian desert in my ute to see Lake Eyre in flood, and I ended up in the opal mining town of Coober Pedy to visit a mate. She introduced me to a bunch of fabulous old Aboriginal women who were then living at an elders' camp in the bush called Ten Mile Creek. Perhaps it's 1953, on the date of the first mainland British atomic test in Australia; perhaps it's 1998 when the Federal Government announced it had nominated an area within which it planned to locate a national radioactive waste dump in South Australia. Instead I'll begin with the conclusion to this story.

On the morning of 14 July 2004 I woke to the news that a very churlish John Howard had announced that the plan for a national, low- to medium-level nuclear waste repository on Arcoona Station in South Australia had been abandoned. For many people in South Australia this represented a 'people's

victory': a grassroots campaign made up of a coalition of various interest groups, which enjoyed the support of a committed state Labor government, had forced the federal government's hand, and the government was far from happy.

The Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta – the council of senior Aboriginal women at the centre of this story – had a banner painted up for them that said 'Kungka Tjuta Winnerz'. When I went out there a couple of weeks later that banner hung in the local aged care facility, and I felt very honoured to gate crash a special morning tea with the old ladies and South Australian Premier Mike Rann.

From damper, jam and cream with the Premier, I'll backtrack to those possible beginnings.

Irati Wanti—the Poison, Leave it

The Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta are a council comprising senior Anangu (Aboriginal) women from Antikarinya, Yankunytjatjara and Kokatha countries.¹ *Kupa Piti* is Yankunytjatjara for 'white men's holes'; the non-indigenous place name 'Coober Pedy' is based on the transliteration of this description.² *Kungka* means woman, and *tjuta* means many. The Kungka Tjuta came together in Coober Pedy in the early 1990s to revive traditional women's culture: to ensure the transmission of stories and knowledge; the continuation of cultural practices; and the maintenance of their responsibilities to country.

In 1998 the Kungka Tjuta initiated a political campaign called *Irati Wanti*, which means 'the poison, leave it'. They were opposed to the 'remote' dumping of radioactive waste then proposed by the federal government's Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) in conjunction with the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO).

Very early on, the Kungka Tjuta released a Declaration of Opposition, which became a sort of mission statement. I'll read from it now:

We are the Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta, the Senior Aboriginal Women of Coober Pedy, South Australia. Pinangku kuilila. Listen to us...

We were born on the manta, born on the earth. We were born in the sand. Never mind our country is the desert, that's where we belong. And we love where we belong, the whole land. We know the stories for the land...

It's from our grandmothers and our grandfathers that we've learned about the land. This learning isn't written on paper as whitefellas' knowledge is. We carry it instead in our heads and we're talking from our hearts.³

The statement went on to explain:

All of us were living when the government used the country for the Bomb. The smoke was funny and everything looked hazy. Everybody got sick... The Government thought they knew what they were doing then. Now again they are coming along and telling us... 'nothing is going to kill you'... We're worrying for our kids. We've got a lot of kids growing up on the country and still coming more, grandchildren and great grandchildren. They have to have their life.⁴

'The Bomb' referred to above is Totem One, detonated by the British Government on October 15, 1953 at Emu Fields, 280km north of Coober Pedy. Totem One was the first mainland test carried out by the British, with the support of the Australian Government and the involvement of Australian Army personnel, as part of an atomic weapons testing program undertaken between 1952 and 1963 at three separate Australian locations – Monte Bello Islands, Emu Fields and the more well known Maralinga Range.⁵ I'll talk about Totem One in more detail later.

That 1998 Declaration of Opposition was the first of many statements made as part of a campaign that began with Sister Michele Madigan – a nun who worked for many years with the Kungkas – writing down their words, and sending letters and faxes from a caravan out the back of an op shop in Coober Pedy. By last year's victory day it was a campaign with a huge profile in South Australia and had attracted significant international attention and recognition.

In 1998, the Kungka Tjuta wrote a call out to 'greenies' saying 'we need help'.⁶ Subsequently, a group called the Melbourne Kungkas was formed; I was a part of the Melbourne Kungkas, which was a small 'solidarity' group, for about four years.

As a history student, I was interested in the fact that so many statements made as part of the *Irati Wanti* campaign drew an insistent link between memories of the 'black mist' produced by Totem One, and opposition to the radioactive waste dump. In fact the remembering and re-telling of 'bomb testimonies' became a priority of campaign work, and individual stories were made publicly available on the campaign website.⁷

So, the Kungka Tjuta consistently linked past and present nuclear activity in the South Australian desert. My interest lay in the power of past discursive practices as they were deployed in the present. In particular, I focussed on one very powerful discursive formation – that of the desert as an empty, dead and disused space.

Knowing the Country

Throughout colonial history, the desert has been thought of and treated as a remote wasteland. This conception is especially evident in histories of white exploration. In Rosyln Haynes' *Seeking the Centre* she depicts the arid interior as an exemplary 'blank space', restlessly reconstituted by colonial fears and fascinations as alternately nightmarish and utopian.⁸ Early explorers' accounts depicted the desert as a vast, geographically uniform and featureless 'wilderness'.⁹ Haynes notes: 'The changelessness ascribed to the desert was also attributed to its Indigenous inhabitants; both were seen as primitive, obdurate and inimical to civilisation.'¹⁰ That point becomes important when we consider that for Australia, the atomic testing program represented a distinctly modern national experience. (The nuclear age has a very complicated relationship with modernity, which I won't go into here.)

Today of course the desert is 'known' rather than 'the unknown', 'mapped' rather than 'blank'. And my argument, which compares ways of knowing the

country, rests on an understanding of the desert as *already* known, and already mapped.

To continue this sketch of non-Indigenous ways of knowing the country let's fast forward to contemporary road maps of the centre, which owe much to the work of the surveyor Len Beadell. Beadell's popular memoirs provide a particularly rich source of colonising spatial narratives.¹¹ His larrikin memoirs repeatedly evoke the desert as 'limitless', 'lonely', 'desolate', 'unexplored', a 'vast wasteland' and 'virgin bush'. Reflecting on his life's work, Beadell has said that he is proud to have 'opened up' four thousand square miles 'that hadn't been touched by anyone since the world began'.¹²

In 1947, Beadell was first approached by the Long Range Weapons Organization (LRWO) about the potential for a rocket range; he went on to survey and identify appropriate detonation sites for the British atomic testing program, constructing a network of access roads through central Australia, which he named after his children. Following Paul Carter and Stephen Muecke, I also point to naming as a colonising spatial narrative, key to the processes of knowing and possessing the country.¹³

To the Anangu communities, whose home is the desert, it is of course not a blank 'space'. It is a network of known places, full of meaning. Rather than dead, it is life-sustaining. Oral histories from the western desert are densely saturated with place names, relate long journeys, and refer to constant travelling. Before contact with the region's invading pastoralists Anangu people used to walk everywhere, linking an extensive network of water sources.

I want to stress that I do not assume that Indigenous people have a symbiotic, natural and unchanging relationship to place. Rather, Indigenous relationships to country are resilient, adaptable, and continue to be strongly felt and expressed.¹⁴

Following the period of colonial contact, which radically disrupted Anangu movement across traditional country, people continued to live very mobile lives, which allowed them to keep connecting and maintaining relationships with a series of known places. Movement was always crucial to survival in the western desert, and new patterns of movement emerged from the period of colonial contact between the 1880s and the 1950s. Movement, or travelling, characterized Anangu society in this period of initial, through to extensive, contact with the region's invading pastoralists.¹⁵ People travelled because food and water sources were seasonal, and routes changed to incorporate ration depots.¹⁶ At the same time, Aboriginal people were participating in the pastoral economy, which often meant itinerant work for the men as stockmen or dingo scalping, and domestic work for women on stations.

Movement then—which allows for the maintenance of an intimate knowledge of country—helps us understand the resilience and adaptability of Anangu cultural and ceremonial traditions.¹⁷ Accordingly, I interpret movement as a tactical 'spatial practice' of Anangu societies, which resists colonising spatial practices.

Let's turn to the political implications of the colonizers' way of knowing the country. It's the image of the desert as 'empty and uninhabited' that enables the decision to test British nuclear weapons in the South Australian desert: testing

conditions were consistently exalted, because of its status as a 'vast open space' which was 'largely uninhabited'.¹⁸ Furthermore, this colonial conception – sustained in the present – enabled the proposal for the radioactive waste dump in the same region. The Federal Government imagined and disseminated an image of that country as, quite literally, a wasteland.

What the Kungkas set out to do throughout the *Irati Wanti* campaign – through their prolific output of letters, statements and testimonies – is to disable that image. They successfully countered this non-indigenous way of 'knowing' the country – or ignorance of country – with their knowledge of a country criss-crossed with stories, histories and routes. They insist that as incredible as it seems, the desert is somewhere that supports life, if only you *know* it well enough.

I want to also spend some time today telling the story of the Totem One test.

The Bomb: Totem One

Many secrets and much duplicitous business surrounded the British Atomic Testing program, which was the subject of a Royal Commission in 1984. So it's hard to imagine that what happened on 15 October 1953 was actually a media event, and consequently a public one. The detonation of Totem One, the first bomb to be tested on the Australian mainland, was eagerly anticipated – by the Menzies Government; by Australian journalists who had travelled to the site to watch the blast and were promised a dramatic story; and by the British Government. These groups had very different expectations of the test: the British Government was keen to demonstrate its nuclear capabilities in a Cold-War political climate; the Australian government, who did not stand to gain access to any of the nuclear knowledge that the British Scientific team were chasing, wanted to prove that this signalled a new, mature and very modern collaboration between the mother country and her former colony. And the Australian media ran with this line too – that the test symbolized a coming of age for post-war Australia.¹⁹

These expectations are crucial to understanding what happened on October 15. The Totem One test was originally scheduled for early October, and kept being delayed because of unseasonal rains. Easterly winds would have contaminated the Emu campsite – which by then was a makeshift town housing 400 people in the atomic testing team.²⁰ In the context of the Cold War, the delays were making the British Government very anxious, and there was high-level pressure on their scientists to detonate.

A meteorological report prepared for October 15 anticipated unusual weather again: a day of no wind shear. The preparatory report concluded it would be dangerous to detonate on such a day.²¹

The testing team had a very partial picture of the Anangu population in the region. Although their knowledge was limited, they were aware of Aboriginal patterns of movement in the north. Since 1947, the LRWO had employed MacDougall as a 'Native Patrol Officer' to safeguard Aboriginal interests from 'contact or encroachment' affected by the British Government's guided projectile (rocket) range established in the same area.²² The Atomic Weapons Test Safety Committee (AWTSC) also used MacDougall. He was given one assistant, a Land

Rover and instructions to monitor thousands of square kilometres of desert. His task was impossible, support inadequate and his advice repeatedly ignored. Any criticisms or suggestions he ventured were met with reprimand. Indeed Chief British Scientist, Richard Penney, complained that MacDougall seemed willing to place the 'affairs of a handful of natives above those of the British Commonwealth.'²³

MacDougall was partly responsible for the forced dispossession of southern Pitjantjatjara people in 1952, and his role in that should not be forgotten.²⁴ But for the purpose of this story, MacDougall's reports had provided the Testing Safety Committee with accounts and a census of the Yankuntjatjara camps in the northwest. That the testing team chose to ignore this information, in order to respond to government pressure, constitutes an act of the most extreme negligence.

So that takes us to the morning of 15 October. After a blinding detonation the Totem One mushroom cloud rose in the sky, and drifted northwest without its radioactive particles dispersing. Its shape was still clearly visible twenty-four hours after detonation, because of these unusual weather conditions.²⁵ The cloud was tracked and Australian pilots were instructed to fly right through the cloud. I know one of those pilots later died of cancer, I'm unsure about the fate of others.

The dense radioactive cloud travelled over Aboriginal communities and pastoral stations in the Coober Pedy region.

There are many chilling descriptions of a 'black mist' within those *Irati Wanti* bomb testimonies I talked about earlier. Thick smoke came rolling through the mulga scrub. Some people thought at first it was a dust storm, but it was too quiet. It left a sticky, greasy residue on leaves of the fruit trees at the pastoral stations.

After the passage of the mist, camps were devastated by sudden deaths, outbreaks of skin rashes, vomiting, diarrhoea, and cases of temporary and permanent blindness. Mrs Eileen Kampakuta Brown describes:

The smoke caught us. We got up in the morning from the tent... everyone had red eyes. The smoke caught us – it came over us. We tried to open our eyes in the morning but we couldn't open them. We had red eyes and tongues and our coughing was getting worse. We were wondering what sort of sickness we had. There were no doctors, only the station bosses. All day we sat in the tent with our eyes closed. Our eyes were sore, red and shut. We couldn't open them... All people got sick right up to Oodnadatta... we all got sick.²⁶

After 15 October Aboriginal cultural practices structured the way communities responded to this traumatic event. Camps were moved following the incident and cultural protocols prohibited naming the deceased. This is not to say that what Anangu people were doing was forgetting: silence is part of a complex remembrance process, which creates a respectful space bounded by silence. As Heather Goodall, who worked for the Pitjantjatjara Council during the course of the 1984 Royal Commission writes, 'Anangu are unable to speak the names of

deceased relatives... because they strongly maintain the custom of memorialising the dead by silence'.²⁷

It's my understanding that this silence is translated into speech for important political purposes. What I mean by that is that the Australian and British Governments tried to enforce a code of silence on atomic ex-servicemen and Aboriginal people affected by the tests were already silenced within the Australian political system of that time. But in the 1980s Anangu people and ex-servicemen started to speak, breaking those legal and political codes, and demanding that their history be acknowledged.²⁸

This demand culminated in the Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia. But what I want to suggest today is that on that day 'the dump got dumped' I think we can identify another point at which the Kungkas' 'talking up strong' forced another conflict between ways of knowing, to some kind of new conclusion.

I agree with Graeme Turner that the Royal Commission was intent on exposing 'the devastating material effects of colonial domination', in terms of the British-Australian relationship. In doing so it grossly 'misrepresented the Australian Government's degree of culpability'.²⁹ The colonial relationship between Indigenous people and the Australian Government was 'submerged under the weight of another story'.³⁰ In eliding this other story, which would necessarily tell of an *ongoing* relationship between the Australian state and Indigenous people, the Royal Commission enacted a 'ritual of separation' – Australia from England, the past from the present. This last point is telling: in contrast, when the Kungka Tjuta speak their story, the past is recalled, analyzed and recounted for the purpose of affecting the present.

Ultimately the non-Indigenous way of knowing the country was rendered untenable as a hegemonic formation, another possible way of knowing was asserted, and recognized. As the Kungkas said:

People said that you can't win against the Government. Just a few women. We just kept talking and telling them to get their ears out of their pockets and listen... We always talk straight out. In the end he didn't have the power, we did.³¹

Endnotes

¹ Anangu is Pitjantjatjara for 'person'. It is widely used as a term of self-identification by Indigenous people from the western desert region of South Australia, Northern Territory and West Australia.

² J. Lennon, *'I'm the One that Know this Country!': The Story of Jessie Lennon and Coober Pedy*, M. Madigan, comp. and ed., Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2000, p. 47.

³ Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta, 'Declaration of Opposition', Campaign Website, *Irati Wanti, The Poison, Leave It*; Coober Pedy, available from <www.iratiwanti.org>, accessed 5 June 2002.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ 'Operation Totem', in *The Report of the Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia*, vol. one, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1985, pp. 137–194.

⁶ Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta, 'First Call Out to Greenies', 3 August 1998, Campaign Website, *Irati Wanti, The Poison, Leave It*, Coober Pedy, available from <www.iratiwanti.org>, accessed 5 June 2002.

⁷ Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta, 'Bomb Testimonies', Campaign Website, *Irati Wanti, The Poison, Leave It*, Coober Pedy available from <www.iratiwanti.org>, accessed 5 June 2002.

⁸ The centre of Australia remained an alluring geographical enigma throughout the nineteenth century, regarded as a potentially fertile expanse for pastoral settlement. R. Haynes, *Seeking the Centre: the Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, pp. 66–67.

⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 88–89.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 34.

¹¹ See in particular L. Beadell, *Bush Bashers*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1971, which deals with the construction of highways in central Australia, and *Blast the Bush*, The Griffith Press, Adelaide, 1967, which is about the site selection and preparation for the atomic testing program.

¹² Address by Beadell to the Shepparton Rotary Club, J.D. Somerville Oral History Collection, 1991.

¹³ P. Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History*, Faber and Faber, London and Boston, 1987; S. Muecke, *No Road*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1997.

¹⁴ Deborah Bird Rose defines 'country' as a 'nourishing terrain', a place that gives and receives life. Country is imagined, represented, lived in and lived with. Country consists of people, animals, plants, dreamings, the underground, earth, water, soils, minerals, air, surface water, sky country – everywhere creative beings have travelled and stopped. It is also a proper noun, Indigenous people 'visit country', 'worry about country', and 'long for country'. D. Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness*, Australian Heritage Commission, Canberra, 1996, pp. 7–8.

¹⁵ C. Mattingley and K. Hampton, 'Survival in Our Own Land', in A. Pring, ed., *Women of the Centre*, Pascoe Publishing, Apollo Bay, Victoria, 1990; J. Skewes, ed., *Coober Pedylanguru Tjukurpa: Stories from Anangu of Coober Pedy*, Umoona Community Council, Coober Pedy, 1997.

¹⁶ See R. Foster, 'Feasts of the Full Moon. The Distribution of Rations to Aborigines in South Australia: 1836–1861,' *Aboriginal History*, vol. 13, no. 1 (1989), pp. 63–77, and 'Rations, Co-existence and the Colonisation of Aboriginal Labour in the South Australian Pastoral Industry 1860–1911,' *Aboriginal History*, vol. 24, no. 1/2 (2000), pp. 1–26.

¹⁷ See for example C.J. Ellis and L. Barwick, 'Antikirinja Women's Song Knowledge 1963–72', in P. Brock, ed., *Women, Rites and Sites: Aboriginal Women's Cultural Knowledge*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1989, pp. 26–27. Ellis and Barwick note the extensive song repertoire of Antikirinja (which the Kungka Tjuta spell Antikarinya) women outside of traditional Antikirinja country. They attribute this in part to the fact that the older generation of women had been mobile throughout their lives, acquiring detailed knowledge of sites and ceremonies beyond their 'traditional ritual country'.

¹⁸ *The Report of the Royal Commission*, p. 15.

¹⁹ R. Milliken, *No Conceivable Injury: The Story of Britain and Australia's Atomic Cover-up*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1986.

²⁰ *The Report of the Royal Commission*, p. 146.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² G. Gray, 'Aborigines, Elkin and the Guided Projectiles Project', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 15, no. 2 (1991), p. 154. Gray shows that considerable opposition, based on concern for Indigenous welfare, greeted the 1946 Chifley Labor Government's announcement that a British guided missile range was to be established near the Central Australian Aboriginal Reserve. MacDougall's appointment was made in response to public criticisms.

²³ *The Report of the Royal Commission*, pp. 308–309.

²⁴ See K. Palmer, 'Dealing with the Legacy of the Past: Aborigines and Atomic Testing in South Australia', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 14, no. 2, (1990), 197–207, and M. Brady and K. Palmer, *Diet and Dust in the Desert: An Aboriginal Community, Maralinga Lands, South Australia*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1991.

²⁵ *The Report of the Royal Commission*, p. 146.

²⁶ 'Bomb Testimony: Eileen Kampakuta Brown', Campaign Website, *Irati Wanti, The Poison, Leave It*, Coober Pedy, available from <www.iratiwanti.org>, accessed 5 June 2002.

²⁷ H. Goodall, 'Colonialism and Catastrophe: Contested Memories of Nuclear Testing and Measles Epidemics at Ernabella', in K. Darian-Smith and P. Hamilton, eds, *Memory and History in Twentieth Century Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p. 59.

²⁸ See P. Langley, *The Maralinga Files* (CD ROM). Researched and written by Paul Langley for the Atomic Ex-Servicemen's Association.

²⁹ G. Turner, 'Semiotic Victories: Media Constructions of the Maralinga Royal Commission', in *Australian Cultural Studies: A Reader*, J. Frow and M. Morris, eds, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1993, p. 186.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p.187.

³¹ Campaign Website, *Irati Wanti, The Poison, Leave It*, Coober Pedy, available from <www.iratiwanti.org>, accessed 1 March 2005.

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